

# Scramble Suit

By Adam Fieled

I.

I changed my name. It was March '98 and it was spring break and I went with Larry to a court-house in Montgomery County and the bailiff said *O yay, O yay, O yay*, and I told the judge briefly about my Dad and my reasons for distancing myself and that was it, I was Adam Fieled. I got a new Driver's License, Social Security card and everything else. I had heard that my new name had a better numerological significance and I felt different immediately and really like a new person. I returned to State College with the necessary papers and I was all set, only my high level philosophy classes were a joke, I could not get into Derrida and Foucault (turns out I wasn't ready), so, using my usual flake techniques I just stopped doing the work, which was none too pleasing to my family, but I was incorrigible at the time, no stopping me— I liked to sit at a coffee-shop called The Daily Grind, and I was quite the little hipster, always in wraparound Lou Reed shades, and then one day I ran into "the one who symbolized my struggle with cool," I still had a crush but I was far different than I had been, she was shocked that I changed my name (I showed her my Driver's License), told me about modest stuff like what she was cooking, and that she lived on West College. I do not remember what I told her but I remember Steph was sitting behind us listening to the whole thing, white sleeveless blouse (spring all around), dark glasses, faint smile, when I rose she rose with me, but I was so used to being passive with her and Justine that I let her get away again, though we walked almost side by side right down Beaver Ave. I considered the possibility that they both really loved me. I was still living in North Halls, which was slightly pathetic, but I had my own

room and did not give a shit. I had made myself known to the indie State College crowd enough that one day one of them, a sweet kid named Dave, called me to ask me to sing with his band.

Soon after, I found my way to Dave's house and began writing songs with him and his friends, though in this context I was not allowed to play guitar, and there was the drummer, Chad-Brad, and Will the bassist, all younger than me and hopelessly innocent but they knew every Robyn Hitchcock record ever put out (which I did not.) We had a long talk about what to call the band, and I convinced them to call the band the Justines, though I did not tell them why or of my terminal idiocy. My life in State College was completely compartmentalized—the theater kids did not know the indie kids who did not know the philosophy people, so everyone had their little piece of me but no one got the whole thing. My life has remained like that, too.

We were set to play the White Lodge on April 21, with a band called Sarge who got a review in Spin magazine.

One day I was walking to McDonald's with Dave and Will and we ran into some Outlaws folks.

They were pretentious and Dave teased me mercilessly about them. That was as close a connection between the strains as ever happened. Adam, the reigning townie indie king at the time, who had recorded me years before, resented that his minions had adopted me, and so he showed up on April 21 with a chip on his shoulder, and it did not help that I decided to perform topless.

Emily liked it.

I made a clumsy pass at the girl from Sarge and was rebuffed. Dave got massively drunk and could barely stand up, so of course I spazzed. It wound up being an OK show but that was pretty much the end of the Justines, though I remained friendly with all of them. For Dave's birthday in June, he threw a pot party in his bedroom, and we all got righteously stoned and listened to *Piper at the Gates of Dawn*. It was a perfect moment, I felt safe, insulated, protected, no paranoia, in this harmless suburban milieu, though I was by far the oldest person in the room and out of place for a number of reasons. Those townies

(most of them) never really got me, vice versa, but you can't beat small college towns in summer for getting high in peace, big cities are a joke in comparison.

II.

That January, I had taken a bus (alone) to the Center County Mall. It was time (I thought) to revamp my image, now that I was regularly performing around State College. I bought myself a large iron cross and I looked for leather pants to buy (thinking Morrison): there were none. The best I could do was a pair of fake leather ("pleather") pants, that I found in a tacky boutique whose name I do not remember. Subtlety not being my forte at the time, I wore the pants every day. They could not be washed, I had to wash 'em by hand, and after three or four months of this I got (God help me) an anal gland infection that was too gross to discuss (and remains so.) That, I suppose, is the price of rock and roll. However, the experience aided me on one important level: it gave me something to write about. In fact, it was around the time of my anal troubles that I had my first real break through as a poet. I had been reading a handful of texts over and over again: Ginsberg, Baudelaire, Rimbaud. I managed to work myself into a trance, so that I had achieved an emptiness new for me, and in this trance I developed powers that I did not have before, insight into language, how to sharpen it to a point. The poems I wrote that April were the first I could live with. "Clean" was about the infection. "Disappear" came about this way: one morning I was sitting on Beaver Ave outside Schlow Library (not sure how or why I was there), in bright sunshine. I mentally looked through my past for hidden riches, and I thought of the day we all met Justine. I realized something

I hadn't before, which is that Kelly would have been jealous of Justine from day one (and she was, in fact, sitting at the dinner table that night.) For the effect of the poem to be striking, I made them both bleached blondes, took it from there. The gist of the poem was Kelly telling me that stop watching Justine make her caesar salad. The gist of the experience itself was that I had learned how to transmute my past into source material for art. I continued to pursue this track, and I even started writing (in the tradition of Sexton and others) about the looney bin I had briefly been thrown into in '97. That poem was called "Prince," and I wrote it about a kid named Wesley who I saw in the bin, and never again. So, the semester ended, I had done no academic work, I had played gigs, done the Justines, but it was then necessary to find a job. I did my usual run up and down College Ave and got hired at a used bookstore next door to McLanahan's. The owner's name was Paul, he was a bit crazed but a good soul and the first person I met who knew as much about astrology as I did (he was a Virgo.) It was a fantastic gig, and for about two months I was in heaven. When Paul was not there, I ran the place, opened it and closed it, played whatever music I wanted (all the usual suspects, plus Elliott Smith, who I discovered at around this time), and got on well with the other bookstore blokes. The day Frank Sinatra died, we closed the store early to go and drink. One of the blokes introduced me to rum and Coke (Captain Morgan's, specifically), and it became my signature drink for the season. By this time I was living in a sublet on South Atherton Street, which was very like the house from '96 only this time I did not go crazy. In fact, '98 wound up being everything '96 was not. The house had a nice second floor porch (a bit like Old Farm Road) that I would sit and eat dinner on each night. I made a ritual of listening to *Reckoning*, and somehow it blended in perfectly with the spring and the view from the porch. The porch looked out on a gravel lot, with houses and small apartment buildings on either side, but lots in small towns can have a quaint charm and this one did. There was a perfect stillness in the air, it coincided with my new poetic powers I was working diligently on. Being 22, it didn't worry me that my folks were pissed by my

flakiness, I felt as  
though I would live  
forever, and that more  
poems would come with  
more dinners looking out  
over small-town sun-lit lots.  
You only get to be 22 once.

III.

It was at around this time that I met Maria. I do not remember how we met. Maria was a townie, still in high school, and very striking physically: medium height, pale, glossy, doll-like skin, straight brown silky hair, often in long skirts, always immaculately made up. Maria was a visual artist with sophisticated tastes: she introduced me to Eva Hesse, and was making her own pieces with similar, plastic-y materials. There was a night in June, not long after Dave's party, when a bunch of us trooped out to the White Lodge to see a few local bands. Behind the White Lodge was a small upward-sloping hill, then a huge field bordered by woods on three sides. Before the show, I played baseball with the townies in the field (pleased, surprised that I could still swing.) Some time between acts I duly tripped out to see what was going on and found Maria sitting on the sloped hill, drinking beer, in a striped sleeveless blouse and the requisite long skirt. We wound up taking a walk in the woods. Maria was drunk. At a certain point, I found myself making out with her. She wanted take things further right there, but I got freaked out and couldn't go on. I was nervous, I did not have a condom, and Maria was a teenager (not that I was that far from being a teenager either.) So, I put her off, and we wound up putting each other on the backburner for several months. Back at the White Lodge, Dave and Emily were drunk and giddy. They knew something was up with Maria and I. It was one of those crazy nights that goes on and on. In fact, at that time I had many crazy nights that went on and on. It was a season of parties. I had become well-integrated enough into the State College indie circuit that I was invited everywhere. Dave (when Emily wasn't around) often wound up being my partner in crime. Also a fellow named Eddie, an aesthete with an Indian girlfriend who hated my guts, would do these rounds with me. I had loosened up quite a bit, and was game for whatever fun was happening. Like nitrous, when somehow several influential scene-makers got hold of nitrous tanks, so you would go to a party and do whippets all night. The first time I did a whippet I "fish-faced," had to wipe the drool off of myself, but it was worth it. Eddie had the best connections in town, and got not only pot but hash (hard to get in the

States), and we smoked the stuff and out of the corner of my eye Eddie turned into a rabbit. More drugs showed up later that year. Meanwhile, I would often be on the phone with Chris, who was back in Cheltenham part of the time. Somehow me and Chris brought out the most bitter, cynical parts of each other, and often our conversations hinged on negative stuff. That New Years had been wild:

I went with Chris and someone else to a coffee joint in Center City. Later, we went back to the 'burbs to pick up Fran, and we drove around, listening to Fran's album. I also had my demo with me (recorded at East Side Studios in Manayunk that autumn), but it was Fran's night and his "Summertime Rock and Roll" killed me. It was a tribute to stoner freedom and sexual retardation that I could relate to. So by the time we got to this big house-party in Abington we were already ten sheets to the wind. Somehow we all trooped out of that party to sit on a curb outside the house and it was freezing but we noticed nothing. Say hello to 1998. Somehow we found ourselves at someone else's house on a wooden back porch and there was a lot more weed to be smoked, and we did. By the end we were all bonkers, I didn't have my car with me but Chris got me home somehow (my folks place in Glenside, not Gulph Mills anymore), and at 4 am I must have eaten five bowls of cereal.

Then I slept  
the whole  
next day.

In the  
spring, I  
saw Chris  
and Fran again,  
Chris was house-  
sitting, weed (as  
ever) was endless,  
Fran's album kicked  
ass. Dissonance arrived  
in the form of a jibe from  
Steve (who Chris was still  
friends with), who apparently  
complained (falsely) that I was  
imitating his wardrobe. It got my  
goat and I fumed. Steve was a right  
prick. But we had fun and Chris came  
over to Glenside and my Mom was  
babysitting a hot teenager (long story)  
and Chris and I were drooling. So Chris

and I were still pretty tight, and we would talk for long stretches of time, but once he left State College in '96 he never came back. I had not heard from N in years at that point, or Ted, or Helen. Chris gave me regular reports on D, and J was in a band and doing pretty well, while Aditya was MIA. Becca sent me a letter at this time: she was suddenly married, and pregnant. Time was passing. Yet things felt strangely timeless as well. Good.

#### IV.

That spring, I played a lot of solo gigs: just me, a Fender Esquire, and a pig-nose. This reflected the influence of Jeff Buckley. My first major solo gig was on April 25, four days after the Justines played the White Lodge. Unfortunately, Sonic Youth was playing an outdoor gig in State College at the same time, so none of the indie kids came to see me. Actually, Adam discouraged them from coming to any of my solo gigs, so they generally did not. When I started playing solo gigs, Adam, who I had been close to, disowned me. It was my first experience of jealousy, where a life in the arts was concerned, and it was not pleasant. Anyway, for whatever reason the guys at the Hub decided to roll out the red carpet. Printed copies of my lyrics were placed on each table, and I was told the performance would be taped for posterity. I was playing my own songs, and a bunch by Leonard Cohen, Lou Reed— “all the great Jews.” The show itself was nothing special; I was sick, my voice was whacked out, and not that many people showed up (though the Hub basement was small and it didn't take a lot to make it look full.) One person that did show up was a lanky, curly-haired blonde that I had seen around quite a bit. Turns out she was “following” me. After the show she cornered me and more or less picked me up. Somehow we wound up in her room, which was on campus, and I waited awkwardly while she talked to her boyfriend on the phone. This girl was not quite attractive enough for me to spaz about. I remained then both semi-retarded and finicky. Thus, nothing happened. I also liked to play at a joint called the Coffee Cellar, where a lot of townie girls liked to hang out (including Maria.) At one point, you could buy a gooball (pot and cookie dough) over the counter there. It was a great place to chill out— relaxed, artsy, no posing. One night in late spring I was on the little raised stage, and I brought Maria up to play “Starman” with me. She was in a black sleeveless blouse, skirted as always. It was funny because a bunch of Outlaws kids showed up while this was happening to gawk. This was, by the way, a new Outlaws generation, with Captain Terry at the helm. They put me in a different position— rather than being beneath them, I got respect, and many of the girls thought I was cute. So, the stage was set for me to finally do Outlaws the right way. But these kids were a little freaked out by the townies, and they soon escaped. It probably didn't help that, once again, I decided to perform topless. I also had some good luck getting



my stuff on the radio—  
at the New Years  
Abington party,  
I met a girl  
named  
Krystal, who  
contacted me  
in State College.  
She had a radio  
show out of East  
Halls (my nightmare,  
mostly a bunch of  
jock dorms), and invited  
me to the studio while  
she played the demo on  
the air. I also started to get  
newspaper write-ups here and  
there. My favorite was a guy who  
seemed taken aback that I actually  
wanted to move to NYC. He wrote,  
“Fieled dreams of launching a career in  
NYC. For now, his act percolates on the  
coffeehouse circuit.” One night Dave and  
I decided randomly to stay up all night. It was  
the beginning of summer, we were young and  
that was reason enough. As we raged around into  
the wee hours, I had these lines from Radiohead  
running through my mind: “the breath of the morning,  
I keep forgetting, the smell of the warm summer air.”  
Dave suggested we go to the roof of Weaver Building to  
watch the sunrise, and we did. Afterwards we went to visit  
Noah at the bakery where he worked: free doughnuts. Dave’s  
friend Jefferson was around and there was a crane sitting in the  
middle of the street and we dared him to get in and he did. This  
night epitomized for me the charm of small towns: the peace, the  
simplicity, the timelessness. You don’t want to stay in one forever  
(or, at least, I didn’t), but here and there they are refreshing, a reminder  
that human life at its best can have a kind of purity. My poetry continued  
to move forward in increments. A big mainstream poet was teaching in  
State College, and I e-mailed him some of my work. He wrote me  
back, praising some of the poems, and this was a huge deal to  
me, getting an official seal of approval. I could boast of no  
seal of approval where my songs were concerned, and it  
was the first intimation that the better part of my luck  
would come in poetry, rather than in music. I began  
to make plans to visit NYC in July: a relative was  
vacating an apartment on the Upper West Side  
for three weeks. I would stay in the place

and scope out New York, because I  
was tentatively planning to move  
there in late '98. Dave and Emily  
would come to visit me. The  
apotheosis of small town  
life came right before  
it ended forever.

V.

When I got to  
NYC, I  
began  
going on  
endless walks,  
learning the city's  
structure in the dog  
days of summer. It was  
interesting to see the Chelsea  
Hotel on 23<sup>rd</sup> Street, where so  
many rockers stayed back when  
rock was all glamour and excess. I  
was walking down 23<sup>rd</sup> Street, on maybe  
my second day there, and I found a book  
lying directly in my path on the sidewalk. It  
was called *Sex Diary of a Metaphysician*, by Colin  
Wilson, and I took it back to 92<sup>nd</sup> and Columbus.  
I immediately saw that this was a serendipitous  
accident, and that it was a book I was meant to  
read. It had sex in it (obviously), large dollops of  
philosophy (somewhat in the tradition of Kierkegaard)  
and the occult, and I have (amazingly, ironically) never  
seen the book for sale anywhere since. Wilson's protagonist  
specifically talks about serendipitous accidents, so finding the  
book seemed a fortuitous way to begin in NYC. This is when I  
began my career as *flaneur*, and my epic walks took me all over  
Manhattan. It was not unusual for me to walk straight from the  
Upper West Side to the Lower East Side and back, and I was thrilled  
by how compressed the city was. This first three week visit, I did not  
take the subway once. I also discovered Washington Square Park, and  
had a good time jamming with random people. Ben from the Godheads  
was in a band at the time that was playing NYC quite a bit, and I went to  
see them at the Spiral Lounge on Houston Street. It was an uneventful show,  
and I only wound up talking to Ben for a few minutes. My Mom came up briefly  
too, and we went out for a nice lunch at an outdoor bistro on Broadway.  
I was writing poems the whole time, and it was during this visit that I  
had my first substantial encounter with High Modernism (beyond  
Eliot and Williams.) On July 8, I wrote a poem called "On Modern  
Poetry," taking Pound, Stevens, and Creeley to task for being  
incomprehensible. I added it to a growing pile of poems, but

this was the only one from this visit worth saving. Then Dave and Emily showed up, though the apartment was way too small to hold three people. What did we care? We went as a threesome for a tour of the town. On Houston Street again, Dave found the chalk outline of a body, and he took a picture of me lying in it. Dave wanted to visit an art school he was thinking of applying to, so we did that too. We found a cheap place on Columbus to eat (outdoor seating), they had good mac and cheese and served us wine (only I was legal.) The only hitch was that Dave and Emily wanted to fool around one night and I got mad at them. The apartment was, as I said, too small. I left NYC with my illusions intact. I thought I would be able to make it there, one way or another. Getting back to State College, there was business to attend to. Paul was closing the bookstore (and moving), so I needed a new job. I found one at a bagel joint on Beaver Ave. Also, I needed a new place to stay (the sublet was only for a few months), and I found one right around the corner from South Atherton, in a house full of weird characters. JD was older, scrawny, bearded, always bedraggled, and didn't seem to do anything but fix electronics. He often repaired amps and pedals for musicians. Jim was a big, burly social worker with a heart of gold. He was, himself, a quirky songwriter and Beatles fanatic, and would jam out at any hour of the day. He especially liked to do the Abbey Road medley. He also had a penchant for doughnuts. Maria was still waiting in the wings; Krystal came to see me a bunch of times at the bagel joint but she had a boyfriend and was very much a good girl. Undistracted, my task once I was settled in was to get a play together for the Outlaws. In the fall of '97, I had drafted a play called "Dada Circus." It was

my attempt to make a “ready-made” play, and I was very taken with Duchamp at the time. I used the same polishing technique I used with “The Touched,” until I knew it would work. I handed it in to them and forgot about it. The big excitement then among the indie crowd was that Elliott Smith had put out *XO*. I caught a flu somehow and I was sick when I bought the record. I took some cold medicine before I put it on, and was rewarded with a substantial epiphany. It was mid-afternoon, mild like it is when summer is turning into autumn, I was half-asleep and the Smith songs were ghostly, and seemed to envelope me. Sunshine played on the walls and I had no cares whatsoever. Jim’s house was old and creaky, painted tan, and that added to the ambience. I caught a new mood as the season turned and began to experiment with “weird,” non-narrative poetry. I was reading a lot of Corso (I could still get into Pattee) and there was a spark of something in the air for me. It was in what was to come.

## VI.

Coffee was beginning to be my obsession. I was drinking three or four cups a day, and it helped me to focus on my writing. The Coffee Cellar, where I had been playing gigs for some time, became my big hangout place, and I was joined by a large contingent of Goth kids, townies, artists, and indie folk. A crew began to develop as autumn commenced that was to be my final State College gang (and by far the most debauched.) That fall was a whirlwind of highness and poetry the likes of which I have never seen before or since. Josh was a townie and his school situation remained unclear. He was dangerous and a bad influence which is exactly what I was looking for. He had a girlfriend named Jess who liked to go to parties and strip naked. Then sit on his lap. Nobody would bat an eyelid. I made a little money selling Josh some extra anti-depressants I had. I also made the mistake of bringing Josh

to Outlaws. This was a week before they were to do "Dada Circus" and Josh started making fun of them during the playwright question period and things turned confrontational. Josh walked out and referred them all to me. Eventually I was invited back to visit Josh in the trailer where he lived. Not knowing how to say no and save face, I snorted a little heroin with him and his friends. It must have been extremely low-grade stuff because I didn't even puke. Nick was a lot more benevolent. He was a tall, thin, bearded fellow, very macho, and made me think of Cyrano de Bergerac. We often drove around in his car getting stoned and listening to the Doors. Nick got me to start going to raves and I learned how to enjoy them. He even got me to "candy flip," mix acid and E, and I was fully expecting to drop dead but wound up having a great time. Though the way that particular night ended was characteristic for me. I slipped out at a certain point to get a bottled water (but only one, which wasn't a strain as it was a cold night.) I enjoyed the cold air so much that I decided to go for a walk on my own. I wound up having a better time walking around than I did at the rave. I got home at maybe 2 am and I felt like I was sailing on a magic carpet. Oddly, I decided to put on Bruce Springsteen's "Born to Run." It worked and I had created another solitary perfect moment for myself. Nick was the kind of guy who didn't care that I'd abandoned him. Whether he scored that night or not I don't recall. Nick would generally come in to the Cellar later, after the townie kids had gone home. The only "late lurkers" among them were the dynamic duo of Lisa and Heather. Lisa was a character with a funny hair cut, long bangs in her eyes and short in back, she was sixteen but looked about twelve, and she was highly amused that I was Jewish. She also picked up that I have a masochistic streak where women are concerned and she loved to bark at me "Kiss my boot, Jew-boy!" She was of German ancestry but this was all in good fun, I can assure you. Heather's claim to fame (as I remember it) was banging so hard that she broke through a wall of someone's house. She was a gawky string-bean but cute-faced and I was frustrated that the two of them showed no desire for

me. They knew about Maria anyway. Maria was not really part of this crew, but was something of an adjunct. They all knew her and liked her. Eventually, it became clear that Maria and I had unfinished business. I began making house-calls, and her parents did not seem to mind. They had their hands full with Maria's three younger siblings, and Maria's younger brother Abe was a certifiable lunatic and I liked him immensely. He was a skater and a stoner and if Spicoli were from State College, that would be Abe. So these visits were fun.

## VII.

By this time it was cold out. Maria had a red flannel coat and a matching red winter hat. I took her for a walk down Beaver Ave and we went thrift shopping. We bought scented candles and other little stuff. Jim was slightly perturbed that I brought a girl home but that was hard to avoid (those guys did their courting elsewhere.) My room was not especially comfortable— a big black mattress, no springboard, a shabby comforter, no chairs or anything to sit on, but being young we barely noticed. When I watched Maria undress, I was taken aback by the porcelain-like quality of her skin. She looked so fragile. I tried to touch her as gently as possible. In fact, I had an attack of Jewish guilt to the extent that the first time we started to have sex, I had to stop, so we sat smoking cigarettes for twenty minutes until I could get up the nerve to go on. But go on we did and I held on to the top of the mattress for leverage. Maria had several orgasms (surprising for one so young, but she was a natural); I had a hard time finishing with a condom on so there was a tinge of "blueness." This was the beginning of several days of this. I even performed cunnilingus on Maria, which I had never done before. Every part of her was so delicate and so perfect that she just felt edible. I also enjoyed playing a servile role. Maria had hydrochloride pot that she got from her brother so we were stoned a lot of the time. It was around her birthday, too (she was a Sag), so there was something to celebrate. We were listening to *Let It Bleed* compulsively and I mixed in Bruce. On one of the nights Jim burst in (we were having some kind of money issue), and Maria and I were both buck naked. There was a heartbreaking element to the whole scenario because I was about to leave State College forever. Yet Maria was a great soul in a great body and definitely

worth it, and when I came back to  
State College during my NYC  
year, it was mostly to  
see her. As for the  
Outlaws folks,  
I had infiltrated  
their ranks  
enough  
to start  
attending  
their parties.  
This had never  
happened during  
the Caesar Girl  
era, and I have  
always wondered  
what it would have  
been like if it did. I  
had a crush on a theater  
major named Ruth, another  
blonde goddess with a thrillingly  
husky voice and a soulful manner.  
At one of these parties, it was  
revealed that I had never shot-gunned  
pot before. Ruth sought to remedy this.  
She kneeled down beside me and said  
“OK, Adam, lean back and open your mouth.”  
It was a delightful moment and I have always  
been disappointed that I never got to know Ruth  
better. Matt was another key member of this crew  
and had aspirations to write himself. He turned me  
on to Ionesco and I realized (unfortunately) that I  
wasn't doing anything original after all. Welcome to  
the life of a writer. Terry I do not remember seeing at  
these parties, he was the kingpin and slightly aloof. I did  
tend to see him at the Diner, where you could get a solid  
breakfast (eggs, home fries, toast) for \$1. Terry told me what  
the old gang was doing in L.A., and some of them were  
apparently having a hard time. It was the beginning of  
my feeling of aversion towards L.A. that has more  
or less continued up until the present moment.  
Terry also confided in me some of his girl  
troubles, and it was nice to see that he  
had some vulnerability too (he could  
be pretty tough and stolid, though  
he was writing great stuff at this  
time and I looked up to him.)  
These memories always bring

me back to "Dada Circus,"  
and I cannot speak for  
anyone else but I  
thought it was a  
pretty decent  
success. It  
was my  
first  
foray  
into po-mo  
and everything  
worked. They asked  
me why I wrote it and  
I said, "to make people  
laugh." A few people picked  
up on the Tibetan monks  
references I threw in, and I  
also managed to work in a  
Duchamp reference during the  
Q and A session. But now all this  
was over. Outlaws had been conquered  
to the greatest extent possible, I had  
played every venue in State College worth  
playing, I had had my fun on other levels, but  
NYC, the great Leviathan, was pulling up right in  
front of me, dashing small town simplicity to the  
ground and lifting me up to a new level, where I  
would try to rise and not crash and burn. Preparations  
had been made; the door was open. All I had to do was  
walk through it, with as much style as I could. And I did.

#### VIII.

New York. The first thing I needed was job. I looked through  
the classifieds in the *Village Voice* but nothing stood out, seemed  
too promising. Eventually I got called back by a gourmet  
deli at 40<sup>th</sup> and Madison. I went down there for an  
interview and they seemed nice enough and that  
was it, I was in. Unfortunately the shift they  
needed filled was 7-3, Monday through  
Friday, so I had to wake up every  
morning at 5:30. Those first  
few days, I had so much  
energy that I decided to  
walk straight from  
92<sup>nd</sup> and Columbus  
to 40<sup>th</sup> and Madison.  
It was late autumn,  
and I will never



forget how the  
city looked  
pre-dawn.  
The sheer scope  
of those blocks  
(I walked through  
Columbus Circle  
straight into Midtown)  
was both wonderful and  
grotesque, and I had a vision  
of New York as a great living  
organism, a sleeping Leviathan.  
I had Springsteen's "New York  
City Serenade" in my head the whole  
time. Midtown especially was an edifice  
of grime, and when it was desolate seemed  
about as welcoming as Hades. My boss at the  
deli was gay, Eastern European, and in a graduate  
program of some sort. L liked to flirt with me and  
there was nothing I could do about. I just had to take  
it. I was a pretty kid with a baby face and this was New  
York— I shouldn't have expected anything else. He filled  
the CD player with Abba and Simply Red, but I at least got  
him to play Nick Drake. It never seemed to occur to him that  
I might actually be straight. Work at this place was fairly grueling.  
There would be long lulls followed by tremendous waves of  
obnoxious Madison Ave execs. They wanted what they  
wanted and had little patience and I had a hard time  
learning how to make all the bewildering varieties  
of coffee beverages that this joint offered. So I  
was always lagging a little behind but I got  
away with it because I was cute and the  
ladies were sweet on me. This scenario  
meant that I really needed to make  
the most of my weekends if I  
wanted to get anything serious  
done. I started spending as  
much time as possible  
in the Lower East  
Side. I found a  
coffee place  
I liked on  
Ludlow  
called the Pink  
Pony. I convinced  
them to let me play  
there but no one showed  
up. All the scene people I

met kept talking about the  
Sidewalk Café on 6<sup>th</sup> and A. They  
at least had a coherent scene going.  
Their open mike was on Monday nights  
and the place was always packed. You  
had to wait four hours to play one song,  
which I did, by which time no one was there.  
That scene was all about “anti-folk” a mutant  
form that prized juvenile humor over genuine  
talent. I knew immediately that they were all almost  
uniformly posers and fakes, but this was New York and  
I had to do something. The figurehead was a wiry, balding  
gay guy who wrote his fair share of “boogers and pizza” songs.  
I didn’t have any luck getting a gig there, but one night he  
asked to take a look at a notebook I was carrying around.  
He saw that I could write and set me up with Jon, who  
was editing a fan-zine out of the Sidewalk. I began  
writing music reviews for him. This was at least  
something but it was intensely demeaning  
writing about musicians who couldn’t  
play, who were far less talented than  
myself. Scenes require belief, and  
I had no belief in this scene  
whatsoever. But New  
York is a desperate  
place and there  
was no other  
scene around  
so I held on,  
wanting out.  
Tough luck.

IX.

One Monday  
at the Sidewalk  
I met a girl from  
France who could  
only speak broken  
English. Her name was  
Justine, a curly blonde with  
blue eyes, razor-thin, and almost  
as tall as me. I do not remember if  
she was there alone or not, but we  
hit it off and I started to see her there  
more often. She was a year older than  
me and had an air of experience. On one  
Monday, I decided to throw a curve-ball and

sing "Wild is the Wind" with a lot of vibrato, a la Bowie. It was a completely incongruous choice, and Justine (who must have known I was singing to her) seemed a little taken aback. It wasn't just her— I could tell that people were baffled, but what can I say? Better Nina Simone than boogers and pizza. Me and Justine finally made a non Sidewalk date, to see *The Thin Red Line*. It just so happened that I had some reviews to hand in to Jon the same night, so I slipped out of theater (which was around the corner from the Strand, off Broadway) to give the reviews to Jon at the Sidewalk. It was a completely pissant move, but welcome to New York City. That night was freezing, it was the dead of winter, I was excited but I didn't know why. Typically, I got there and Jon wasn't there. Nevertheless, I wanted those reviews published, so I decided to sit and wait. All the time I felt guilty about Justine, sitting alone in the theater. At the table next to me was a woman who looked intriguing. She was buxom, with olive skin and large features, green eyes and silky black hair. There was also something Asian about her eyes. Like Justine, she seemed to be older and had an air of experience. We began a conversation and I found out that she was waiting for a blind date that never showed up. Nevertheless, she seemed more amused than anything else. Her name, she said, was Briana. So she was waiting for a blind date while my date was waiting for me to come back. Our meeting was a karmic (and comic) accident. I left that night and dutifully returned to Justine, who soon returned to France, and sent me a cool Tony Oursler postcard. But Briana and me had hit it off and we started to hang out. I soon learned that Briana was a musician, often played the Sidewalk. But her songs were earnest and folky, mostly love songs, and she sang them in a delicate, husky alto. She didn't fit in at the Sidewalk much more than I did, and she was something of an adjunct to the scene there, rather than a mainstay. Briana tended to be late for appointments

and was often (like everyone else in New York) frazzled. There didn't seem to be an issue of us dating. We slotted pretty easily into friendship without too much tension, though I certainly found her attractive. New York is like that— people aren't relaxed enough to feel much attraction to each other. Just taking care of your own business is so much hassle that there is little left for anyone else. It's a hard town to get laid in. Plus, I'm sure that Bri (and justly) thought of me as a comparative child. But I was drawn into her nexus nevertheless and I started to meet her friends, and some of them became my friends too. Gina was even older than Bri, a decade older than me, and extremely gorgeous, auburn hair, pale skin, like Bri large features, tall. She often sang back-up for Bri and had associated with a lot of musicians. Briana and Gina had a very strange relationship. I learned that Bri tended to "burn through" people, leaving wreckage and broken hearts behind her (not that I was any slouch myself in that department). However, there was a symbiosis between these two women that was hard to define. Bri was crashing at Gina's pad in the West Village for a while and there was an issue of some kind of affair. Briana liked to call herself "straight but not narrow," and I was left to surmise the obvious thing. I was surprised, but Gina, who came from a lot of money (Connecticut), seemed to rather like me. In fact, she often seemed to be more interested in me than Bri was, which I couldn't figure out. Maybe she thought I could be her boy-toy. In any case, I wound up spending a substantial amount of time alone with Gina, and it was awkward, I never understood what we were supposed to be doing.

X.

Drama started  
to erupt at the  
deli. They brought  
in a manager-in-training  
to train under L. He was  
my age and he was fucking  
obnoxious. We had an argument  
about something and he claimed  
inherent superiority; "after all," he  
said, "look where I am and where  
you are." This was less of a hurt and  
more of an intense irritation cause the  
guy (always in shirt and tie, skinny, hairless

face) was stump dumb and about as original as a bologna sandwich. I countered, admittedly, with an equally stupid salvo: "I'll see you on the cover of *Rolling Stone*." Little did I know that in five years, the Internet would make this magazine obsolescent, by which time I wouldn't care anyway. But the atmosphere around me there deteriorated. L rode the subway with me once and I pointed out some women that I found attractive and he said, "You're killing me, Adam." L seemed to think I was gay but I just didn't know it. He could certainly remedy that. This impression was reinforced one day when I was serving someone and L decided to come up and slap my ass. It felt like a gross violation, because we both knew what the subtext was: *you're gay, now let me show you what that means*. The problem was, I wasn't gay, and I did not enjoy the feeling of being objectified by men. It felt like hands pawing at me. It didn't help at this time that I was told my performance wasn't up to snuff. Truth be told, I was bad at food service, and got by based on looks and charm. I was constantly screwing up orders and ringing things up incorrectly, and I could never remember how much a rugeloh cost or how many butters to put in a bag with a scone. Plus, I was staying out late a lot, and working on four hours sleep. The door to the deli was glass, and I will never forget the dread of facing it every morning at 6:45 am. Finally, at a certain point, after several months, I decided to give up and quit. I wasn't paying any rent at my relative's place, I was making a little less than \$300 a week, so I was able to save a decent amount of money. It would have been enough to live on for six months in State College, more like six weeks in New York. I got involved in a huge fight over my last check. They wouldn't give it to me, and I had to bully my way past the counter to get it, until the fat scoundrel who ran the place opened up the safe and handed it over. I decided to tell him about L, and the ass-slapping incident. It was, after all, the truth, and it had made my life very tense. That night, I got a nasty phone-call from L: "I'm not too happy with you, Adam."

Yeah, no shit. He started  
ranting and raving and I  
hung up on the schmuck.  
You sexually harass, you better  
be prepared to pay the piper.  
In any case it didn't matter because  
I never saw any of them again. I had  
other things to worry about: my relative  
was coming back, and I needed a place to  
stay. I was thinking Lower East Side, so I  
put fliers up all over the East Village. I got a  
call from a guy who lived at 10<sup>th</sup> and A in Alphabet  
City, so I went down there to have a look. It turned out  
to be a gay couple, Robert and Tim. I later found out that  
they were on house arrest (ankle bracelets, the whole nine  
yards) for dealing drugs, but they didn't tell me that then.  
I also later found out that they had an act, knew a lot  
of celebrities, and were very big on the gay club  
circuit. All I knew then was that I needed badly  
to have a place to sleep, and they seemed nice  
enough, though the pad was filthy and not  
very comforting. So, I somehow got all  
my stuff from 92<sup>nd</sup> and Columbus to  
10<sup>th</sup> and A, and made myself as at  
home as I could possibly be. The  
location, at least, was great, and  
once again I got this break  
because I was a pretty  
kid and it must have  
been titillating for  
Robert and Tim.  
My bed: a couch.  
But it worked.

XI.

I tried a few  
other things  
to make  
money—  
I got hired  
at a trendy  
eatery in Gramercy  
Park, to which I was  
obliged to wear dress  
clothes. My job was to  
relay phone orders to the  
cooks, scribble them down

and place them where they  
were visible. That was it, so it  
meant standing in the same spot  
for eight hours. I knew three hours  
in that I could never handle this forty  
hours a week. They liked me but at the  
end of the day I abruptly told them that  
this wasn't for me. Then I got hired at a big  
movie-plex on the Upper East Side. Again, dress  
clothes were required. I was there to check tickets,  
pick up trash, and walk down the aisles like an usher,  
making sure everything was in place. This was right when  
the first movie from the second wave of the *Star Wars* series  
came out, so I got to see the movie for free. But the other guys  
that worked there were complete cretins and I couldn't stand the  
atmosphere so that was a no go. When I got hired at the Strand bookstore,  
I thought that I had finally hit pay-dirt. The Strand was legendary not just for  
selling books, but because many legendary New York musicians (like Tom Verlaine)  
had worked there in the Seventies. I showed up my first day in a positive frame of mind.  
Thus, I was slightly shocked when my female boss led me to a narrow aisle with an  
impossibly high stack of shelves on each side and said "start shelving." The  
narrowness of the aisles meant that it was almost impossible to move,  
especially with customers milling around. At one point, I couldn't  
find a stool to shelve a book on a high shelf, and the boss hadn't  
introduced me to anyone else so there was no one I could ask  
for help. This was an hour into my shift and I was looking at  
seven more hours of solitary agony in the midst of throngs  
of people in a store where I knew no one. As so often  
happened in my early days, I panicked, threw off my  
name-tag, walked straight out of the Strand and  
never went back (except to shop.) I wonder if  
anyone even noticed that I was gone. For the  
moment, I gave up looking for work, leaning  
on my previous earnings, and tried to find  
ways to further my career in the arts. I was  
aided by an extreme lucky break— some  
time in winter, there was a mild day and  
I spent some time jamming with people  
in Washington Square Park. One of  
them was a guy named Todd who  
said he was a singer. I didn't  
think much of the incident  
(already knowing that lots  
of numbers get exchanged  
in New York and still  
nothing happens),  
but in the middle  
of me moving

to the East  
Village  
Todd  
called me.  
Turned out  
he lived on  
Leonard Street  
in Tribeca, next  
door to the Knitting  
Factory (you could hear  
the shows from Todd's  
apartment.) The apartment  
was roomy and Todd clearly  
had money. He came, in fact, from  
a rich family and was finishing a film  
degree at NYU. Todd was short, stumpy,  
prematurely grey and completely crazy. We  
hit it off immediately. He wanted to write songs,  
so I started bringing my guitar over to Leonard Street.  
We started from scratch, the chemistry was good and we  
were rolling. Through Todd, I got introduced into my second  
major New York nexus— NYU film kids. These kids *all* came from  
money, and it meant little to them to ask their parents for \$25,000 to make  
a movie. They took things (massively) for granted, but they had figured  
out the secret (without realizing it) to New York— you do it with money,  
or you don't do it at all. My Mom had told me stories about what New York  
was like in the Sixties, early Seventies— you could be Bohemian and still live  
decently. *Fin de siècle* New York? Forget it. It is a city for the rich and the trust-  
funded to succeed in, especially where the arts are concerned. Did somebody say  
The Strokes? Anyway, hanging with these guys was a blast. They had pot, and I mean  
*killer* pot, delivered to their door like a pizza. The first time I smoked Todd's weed, it  
literally knocked me flat on my ass. We were listening to *OK Computer* and I had a  
vision of Thom Yorke's face melting. It reminded me of my acid trip, was briefly scary.  
So I had reached a stage where my energy was directed to music, but without a clear goal.

## XII.

My adventures with Todd and his gang were many, but it is hard to remember them, for  
the simple reason that the weed we were smoking was not merely good but *pulverizing*.  
Looking back at us, I am genuinely in awe. I have no idea how any of us could have  
taken a ride on the NYC subway, or milled through Times Square during rush-hour,  
on so much dope, but we did. We were all about twenty-three: call it sheer nerve.  
For those months, I was constantly finding myself in sparsely furnished lofts,  
without knowing how I got there. Todd had established enough absolute  
trust with his friends, that he could get there, hang out, and stick around  
if his friends decided to leave. Once a bunch of us went to see Fellini's  
*8 ½* at midnight in Midtown. In our haze, it made very little sense.  
I also became acquainted with a stunning brunette that Todd had



a huge crush on. He met her in an elevator and that became the subject of one of our songs. One night we were hanging at the Mercury Lounge and she showed up with a bunch of her friends. She was flirting with me but I could feel Todd getting upset and nothing happened. There was also a night when we were hanging in a bar called Niagra on Avenue A, not far from where I was staying, and we met two models. One was a blonde called Olga and we clicked instantly but she was just passing through town, and Lord knows I couldn't bring her back to Robert and Tim (who were, of course, always home), so nothing happened. Usually, I had my acoustic with me, and Todd and I loved to regale people with our rapidly expanding oeuvre. In three weeks, we had written a dozen songs. Most of them were in a slick white-funk style, a la Chili Peppers. I was happy to play John Frusciante. We also went to see the showing of Todd's movie on the NYU campus. The movie was called *Boxes* and concerned an OCD guy who was bullied into doing things by boxes that talked to him. It was very strange and not completely engaging and I wasn't surprised Todd didn't win any awards for it, though it looked professional. When we got a chance, Todd and I were also recording demos at a jingles studio called Buttons Sound, on the seventh floor of a high-rise at 45<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup>. The sound-guy, Paul, was from a celebrated musical family, played bass, and was a genuinely nice person (a rarity in NYC.) Me and Todd loved being bratty kids and smoking up in the hallway bathroom before we hit Buttons. The atmosphere was quite relaxed and we recorded our songs without much hassle. I hit it off so well with Paul that I started to record my own material at Buttons too. This was all done for free and was a tremendously lucky thing. Todd, by the way, never met Briana, or any of the Sidewalk crowd. I had distanced myself from that scene almost immediately, though when Briana played there she would

occasionally bring me onstage to play something. Eventually, Todd left for L.A.—one of his movies was in a festival out there. Todd still thought we would form a whole band when he got back. We had found another guitar player named Lucas, who was also an actor, and had dubbed ourselves Hyde. But Todd could be flaky and irresponsible, and he had days when he absolutely could not sing on pitch. As much as I loved the guy, it was hard not to feel like playing in a band with him would drive me crazy. So, when Todd left, I knew that that would be the end of our partnership. Because Paul was such a nice person, I had a place to record for free, and I did. I managed to record a lot of the material that I had had floating around for years. These recordings are what I call “Dead Zone” recordings, because I was so fucked up while I was doing them that I have no recollection of doing them. I had discovered the joys of scoring dope in Washington Square Park. Around the periphery, there were always guys selling weed, and all you had to do was look at them a certain way and you would both know the score. You would follow them into an alley and take your \$20 bag. I also kept running into Cheltenham people at around this time— Ted, who I went for Chinese food with, and who came with me to the Sidewalk and met Briana; J, who I ran into on the subway, on my way to Midtown to hit Buttons Sound, and who said he was thinking of going to law school; and D, who was going to NYU for psychology, involved in shadiness, and had little interest in hooking up with me. For some reason I felt the need to go blonde, nose-ring myself, really fit in to the East Village vibe, so I must have been a sight to see. At the same time, I started to get some theater breaks, which I wasn’t expecting, so I had established as many compartments in New York as I had had in State College, though sans comfort.

### XIII.

One day I  
was at  
the  
Pink Pony,  
writing when  
I noticed a group  
huddled in a semi-  
circle around a guy  
wearing odd glasses

with dyed-pink hair. He was a little chubby and of indeterminate age. After a certain point I realized that it was a theater troupe and they were talking about plays. When the meeting dispersed, I went up and introduced myself to the leader, whose name was Aaron. I told him that I had some finished plays and that I was looking to have them produced. He told me that his group operated out of the Piano Store, also on Ludlow Street (a block down from the Pink Pony), and that I could bring my plays and have a meeting with him there. This I did, after doing my best to polish what I had. I brought him "Dada Circus," that the Outlaws had done, and a new one-act called "Fuck Day." Aaron talked in general terms about a festival he was putting together, that would rival the Fringe Festival, of which he used to be a part. So I signed on with his troupe there, though it took me some time to figure out how the machine worked. Aaron was a nice person, and what I would call an *art slut*. That is, he accepted almost everything reasonable that came his way, on principle. The problem came when it was time to turn his visions into realities. Circumstances, finances, and probabilities of success largely determined what got produced and what didn't. All this meant that if Aaron said yes to ten hypothetical productions, three would get produced and seven would fade into oblivion, just through a lack of talent and/or resources. So I learned very quickly that there would be no guarantees. It didn't help matters that I was very unfocused at the time: between music, poetry, looking for a job, and getting high, I was not capable of sticking to this in a way that would ensure that my plays would be the three out of ten. Nevertheless, I was accepted into the circle and invited to the group meetings. They were awkward for me because there would often be round-robins where people would talk about how their projects were developing. Mine were not really developing at all, so I would stammer a few things and then clam up. To make up for this, I signed on to do tech work at an event Aaron was doing at the Bowery Ballroom. It was uneventful other than it helped me feel slightly more at home. Aaron thought it would be a good idea to pair me with a girl named Mercedes, another poet/musician. She was blonde, tall, rather husky, but I liked her very much and we began rehearsing here and there. It got to the point that a few of my things were being actively rehearsed, and I went to

some of the  
rehearsals—  
stoned.  
Thus, all I  
can remember  
is a vague feeling  
of pride. Meanwhile,  
I was on the prowl for  
some action, which the  
Briana/Gina nexus had not  
supplied. I was crippled before-  
hand because I had no pad to bring  
anybody to— I was still crashing on  
Robert and Tim's couch. Somehow I  
met Sharon, a tall, buxom blonde from the  
Midwest who somehow found her way to New  
York and worked as a shop-girl. She was solid and  
genuinely interested, and we went on several dates. I  
was just too finicky and I let her slip away (and when some-  
one slips away in New York, it really is bye-bye.) Then there  
was Rivka, who was Israeli, red-headed and freckled, and who  
I picked up in Washington Square Park. She always had good hash,  
and we would get wrecked and go clothes shopping. For some reason  
I decided to get a pair of black dress shoes. I was down to 120 pounds and  
I'm sure I looked like a freak. Rivka and I somehow drifted apart amidst all  
the dope, and for the life of me I can't remember how or why. There was one  
time I picked up a group of girls and brought them back to the place at 10<sup>th</sup> and  
A. We smoked pot in the little back-yard surrounded by piles of dog-shit and I think  
we had a pretty good time but I never saw any of them again. Who knows? The point is  
that I wasn't getting any, but I was too distracted to notice most of the time. Me and  
Briana continued to see each other frequently, and there was discussion of her  
acting in one of my plays. We got as far as a meeting with Aaron but no  
farther. Gina invited me back to her pad to watch *Apocalypse Now*. We  
were lying on her bed and I think she was expecting me to do some-  
thing but I was shy with a sophisticated 34-year-old so I let the  
moment pass. Spring was turning into summer and hot weather  
in New York is very cruel. More theater stuff was on the way.

#### XIV.

I was looking for a (hopefully paying) internship. A friend of  
a friend, who happened to be a playwright, suggested that  
I give 13<sup>th</sup> Street Rep a shot. They were famous for "Line,"  
the longest-running Off-Off Broadway play in New York  
history. I walked in on a bright spring day (or down,  
actually, as the front-room of 13<sup>th</sup> Street Rep was  
beneath street-level), and made an inquiry. It just

so happened that Edith, the grande dame who ran the place, and was something of a legend in New York theater (which I didn't know at the time), was hanging out in the front room, and she sat me down to give me a good looking over. She took one look at my CV, saw that I had done Carnegie Mellon and had some theater training, and decided that rather than being an intern, I should act. This was unexpected but not unwelcome. She introduced me to Christian, a tall, Nordic-looking dude, about my age, who was doing some kind of residency at 13<sup>th</sup> Street. He immediately cast me as O'Connor, the dumb-ass dog in a children's play they ran on Saturday and Sunday mornings. Really, had I been older and less naïve, the situation would have been intolerable. That show was not free, 13<sup>th</sup> Street was making money from it, and yet us actors did not see one thin dime. It was total exploitation. Still, a foot in the door is what it is, and a gig was a gig. It might lead somewhere. I went so far as to get head-shots done so I could be on the big wall next to the other 13<sup>th</sup> Street Rep actors. I'll never forget the photographer's studio, somewhere in Mid-Town, with all these scantily clad models hanging around. Oh the titillation, and the sleaze factor was high. But I got the shots taken and was duly placed on the wall. I had also placed an inquiry with Ellen at La Mama. My first inquiry was about having my plays produced there. Ellen said that "Dada Circus" was "too conventional" for them to consider. Then I gave them my CV to see if I could get an internship. She handed it off to a famous avant-garde director named Richard, who was doing a post-modern version of "Hamlet" at the Performance Garage on Wooster Street in Soho, home of the famous Wooster Group. I began working with them at the same time I was doing 13<sup>th</sup> Street Rep, and signed on as assistant stage manager. I was utterly unsuited to the job— I did not have a head for detail (or,

rather, I might have had a head for detail if I weren't stoned all the time), and especially not in a context this stressful (the production got a write-up in the *Village Voice*, Spalding Gray even came to see the show one night.) So this was a semi-prestigious gig, but a kind of nightmare nonetheless, and guess what? No money! I was doing all of this gratis, and Richard did not deem it necessary to give me any material compensation. The only real compensation was that I got to watch all the hot actresses (and Gertrude was particularly hot) undress, and I was shocked by the rampant nudity backstage.

The other perk, if you can call it that, is that all of us trooped onstage during the production for Hamlet's "what a piece of work is a man" speech. So, technically I can say I was "in" a Wooster production.

But, honestly, this gig gave me the willies, and it didn't help that in my infinite gaucherie I accidentally mentioned MacBeth backstage one night and the grave-diggers got mad at me.

What was going to happen happened— I flaked out, left them without an assistant stage manager. I felt bad about it at the time, but I don't now. They had a lot of nerve expecting me to do all this work for nothing, and the fact that I was willing shows you just how desperate artsy kids can get in New York.

Back at 13<sup>th</sup> Street, Christian brought in a hack to write songs for our show. Being a cocky sod, I tried to convince Christian to let *me* write songs for the show.

We got in a fight about it, and Christian asked me to leave. I don't remember if I left or not, but the joke was on him— I was a far better songwriter than the geek he brought. People in New York just don't listen. I didn't care— I was recording regularly with Paul at Buttons and a new sound was taking shape. The question was whether I could take it somewhere.

## XV.

In the midst of all this tumult, I had an opportunity to revisit State College. A friend of mine who had family in New York was coming briefly into town, and he offered to give me a lift back to State College and a place to crash while I was there. I was trapped in a kind of gridlock and the idea of

getting away for a few days seemed germane. What I really cared about was seeing Maria again. We had kept in close touch. There was a payphone on Astor Place that I always called her from, and I would be in my usual stressed-out mode and she would comfort me. Neither of us, however, pledged any kind of faithfulness, and it would've been foolish for us to do so. Maria always had at least ten men breathing down her neck, and I was usually involved with someone or other. There had also been many letters, which were, like the phone calls, affectionate but uncommitted. I now knew in no uncertain terms that I had lost something (someone, actually) by leaving State College, but there seemed to be little I could do about it. Seeing her would at least be better than nothing. My friend arrived at 10<sup>th</sup> and A, and was aghast by the state of the apartment. Robert and Tim were out, but I don't remember if their probationary period was over and if they were "cheating" or not. Anyway, he crashed on the couch after I played him my new recordings (the best was "Riding the Waves," which sounded like *Hunky Dory* era Bowie and which I had co-written with Todd at Leonard Street), and the next day we took off for State College, after having smoked several bowls. We smoked maybe five more times during the ride there, and I admired his ability to drive while under the cannabis influence (I, being a terrible klutz, never even tried.) I was feeling shaky and weird; when we got back to his apartment, I dropped a handful of CDs, shattering their cases. It was a cloudy day, as often happens in Happy Valley in springtime, and I duly picked up the phone and called Maria. Before she got there, we were visited by a dude that had been a few years below me at Cheltenham. We celebrated this coincidence with a few more bowls. Maria arrived while my friend was out running errands, and we adjourned to his bedroom. It was awkward, it was someone else's bed, Maria felt uncomfortable. We cuddled and fooled around but Maria refused to fuck. I would've done it because I wanted her so badly, but her restraint was wise. As stoned as I was, a normal conversation was impossible, and she seemed resigned to my incoherence. She left on an inconclusive note, but I

was glad to have seen her and didn't  
feel gypped. That night in that apartment  
there was a party with opium and a long jam  
session. I seem to remember playing plugged-in  
lead guitar from a second-floor porch. I also  
remember being underwhelmed by the opium,  
which I thought would blast my head off but instead  
added a mild edge to an already formidable high. If  
I had been smarter, I would have stayed in State College  
for at least a few more days, and done Maria the right way.  
But something was happening, some deadline pertaining to  
Aaron and my plays and I felt that I needed to be back in NYC.  
It was all an illusion— Aaron never wound up using my plays anyway.  
No matter— I crashed one night on my friend's couch and was NYC-  
bound all over again. The phone-calls and letters between Maria and  
I trailed off. I was really alone. My life in NYC at the time did not  
include no poetry, but I hadn't yet found focus so poetry was  
something I produced in a non-public way. I did regularly  
read at one series, on 15<sup>th</sup> Street off of Union Square, and  
made some inroads getting my stuff published through  
that crew. Still, I was erratic regarding what I chose to  
read and I remember reading an elegy I wrote to  
Jeff Buckley and feeling embarrassed about it  
afterwards. I saw poets like Philip Levine  
and Charles Simic read at NYU, and,  
not having gone avant-garde yet, was  
suitably impressed. I even got Simic  
to sign my copy of Rimbaud's  
*Season in Hell*. One of my  
few solitary epiphanies  
in New York happened  
on an abandoned  
construction site  
near Washington  
Square Park, where  
I scrawled *I will be  
an influential  
poet on Earth,*  
but I had no  
idea why I  
wrote it. I would.

XVI.

Chris had been sending  
a series of letters to the apt.  
at 10<sup>th</sup> and A. The letters were  
extremely rancorous, and it was



clear that Chris was not pleased  
with our friendship or the way that  
I had developed. Chris was big on  
“psychology” and often liked to apply  
his skills as an amateur psychologist to  
his friends. He found me, he wrote, too  
narcissistic, with a martyr complex and an  
overly Romantic imagination. All fair complaints,  
but these insights were unheralded, he seemed to  
be picking them out of the air, as a pretext to end our  
friendship. The dream-world I lived in, he said, “wasn’t  
working for him.” As much as I could concede that he was  
right (at least on some levels), the whole thing was disingenuous  
because at the root of it was Chris’s inability to forgive me for messing  
around with D back at Cheltenham. We had covered this over, but it turns  
out that he had neither forgiven nor forgotten it. Five years later, he was  
still obsessed with D (the irony was that I was actually having contact  
with D at this time), and all the things that had happened were still  
eating away at him. All this was exacerbated by the fact that Chris  
had become a compulsive drinker and over-eater: plates of chicken-  
wings washed down by copious beers every night. The result is  
that he just got heavier and heavier. It was especially sad for  
me to watch, because when I met Chris he was an extremely  
good-looking adolescent: blonde, sleek, well-kempt. But  
now he had made it impossible for himself to have a  
girlfriend or even to hook up. He resented both me  
and Steve (who was also in NYC, though our orbits  
did not touch) our successes with women and he  
was still stuck in a mode that we had grown out  
of. The problem was that Chris *enjoyed* this kind  
of conflict and he liked to prolong it. He would  
gladly have exchanged twenty more letters, each  
one going into great detail in describing what a  
narcissistic creep I was. He liked to get in a  
groove and *rut*. I didn’t have the time or  
the energy to do it, so I didn’t answer  
the letters. It would be years before  
I would hear from Chris again. It  
was a sad ending that I did not  
pay much attention to at the  
time. I had my own jealousy  
issues to deal with— Bri  
and Gina had become  
involved with a band,  
a bunch of rowdy  
guys all pushing  
thirty, and Bri  
in particular

fell for them  
and their  
whole vibe.  
They were OK,  
but like a lot of  
bands, particularly  
NYC bands, they had  
more on the ball with  
*attitude* than they did with  
music. Their swagger was more  
impressive than their chord changes.  
Suddenly, I was hearing intimate bed-  
room details, and there is nothing a self-  
respecting guy hates more than playing the  
*friend* role. Inadvertently, I got back at Bri for  
placing me this way. For some reason, we were  
all stuffed in a car, riding down Houston Street. They  
were playing Bri's demo (Bri was recording now at Buttons  
too, Paul was a saint), nodding, OK, OK. Then I give them  
*my* demo to play, and they heard the first song, "Love Me, Blame  
Me" (written in the basement of Leete Hall, December '95, under the  
influence of Oasis and Neil Young) and went a little crazy. I had moved  
them more than Bri had. When we got to the bar and got out of the car, I  
could see that Bri was visibly dejected. It was a little disillusioning— I thought  
we could steer clear of NYC envy, but we couldn't. Bri would take things out on  
me in weird ways— I used to like to kill time at the Virgin Megastore on Union Square,  
and I discovered Beth Orton. *Central Reservation* was huge at the time, and it was one of  
the few albums I bought while I was living in NYC. I lent it to Bri, and she never gave it  
back. It was like what happened with Carrie and *The Bends* in State College, in reverse— Bri,  
even when prompted, would feign innocence, which was ridiculous because we both knew  
she had the album. Still, there were moments of peace and calm between us. Even though  
I was no longer involved with the Sidewalk, she brought me onstage to sing "Riding the  
Waves" during one of her shows. I could feel the crowd liking me, which was a  
surprise. We would have brunch at the Sidewalk too, which was cheap and  
solid, and though Bri was inevitably a half-hour late we had a good time  
together. I told Bri about my State College nervous breakdowns and  
she told me her own stories of turbulence. We even busked together  
a few times in the subway. But New York makes real intimacy  
hard to catch. We always got near it without ever touching it,  
and that is how I felt about Bri. In a different context, we  
could have been much sweeter on each other. NYC is not  
a sweet place, and many sweet things taste sour there.

## XVII.

It seemed that for Robert and Tim, the titillation of  
living with a cute younger guy was wearing thin.  
This wasn't so much a problem for Tim— he

was gentle, caring, and kind. But Robert was a gay thug and was into imposing his will. Edges began to become apparent in Robert's behavior. He began leaving kinky stuff around the apartment, in prominent places— pictures of himself naked, bits of gay porn. I got the distinct impression that he was sending me a message. At the time, I was sleeping "downstairs," the apartment had two floors, connected by a spiral staircase, and the bottom floor was uncarpeted, so I was sleeping on linoleum. It just so I happened that my "floor-spot" was situated right next to Robert's computer. I had put up some clippings of Ziggy Stardust-era Bowie on the wall near the computer, and Robert took these as an open admission of gayness. He left his personal journal out, open to a page where he said that I was "suppressing gay tendencies" and that I "longed to be as open and free as someone like Bowie." It was pure bullshit, a projection of Robert's own fantasies. All this culminated in an incident in which Robert left me a note, offering to give me a blowjob. He wanted me to acquiesce without saying anything: "just leave your boxers on the computer chair, and I'll know." I made the mistake of confronting Robert about it and letting him know I had taken the note. The minute I left the apartment, Robert (probably fearing some kind of legal charge) went through all of my stuff until he found the note and took it back. He was scum. But I definitely knew at this juncture that my days at 10<sup>th</sup> and A were numbered. I began making inquiries and responding to ads about places to stay in Brooklyn. Yet I was in a very bad position, technically unemployed and without much savings left. The whole edifice of my New York life was starting to crumble. I left 13<sup>th</sup> Street Rep rather abruptly, after another fight with Christian. I had somehow managed to miss a rehearsal, and he made a point of telling me "you're easily replaced." There was no parting scene— I just stopped showing up. They deserved no better. Dealing with Aaron was different— he really was a nice person (albeit scattered), and had tried in his fashion to help me. Truth be told, I had too many fundamental issues to deal with and any work that wasn't paying would need to be cut. I had almost nothing left. The last meeting at the Piano Store was cordial. Aaron said, "It's been real," and I have always wondered if he meant it or not. Finally, the last straw came with Robert

and Tim. I got in an argument with Robert over (believe it or not) whether or not Madonna was going to be at a certain party. Robert went into a blind rage and ordered me to leave the apartment and never come back. He did this, mind you, without finding out whether or not I had a place to crash. For all he knew, I would be sleeping on the street that night. May he burn in hell. But there was a payphone right outside the apartment and I called my relative at 92<sup>nd</sup> and Columbus and (thank God!) she was home and I could crash there for a time. I put my whole energy into finding another place to live. There was a room with a tough white lady in Queens that looked promising. She eventually said yes, but before she did I found another place, a hole-in-the-wall dump in Park Slope, Brooklyn, right where it turns into Bay Ridge. This was *Saturday Night Fever* territory, only now everyone spoke in Spanish, when I went to buy groceries I was the only English speaking person in the store. It was a brick, brown, terrifically ugly neighborhood, 45 minutes outside the city on the D train. Plus, I did not have my own bathroom, it was down the hall, and always stank. The floor of the apartment was uncarpeted and there was no mattress to sleep on. In short, it was even more completely uncomfortable than 10<sup>th</sup> and A had been, but it was the best I could do. I had lost all direction and did not know what to do next. Where could I work? What could I write? My first response (typically) was to buy a big chunk of opium in Washington Square Park. I wound up eating it on a peanut butter and jelly sandwich: bad idea. It was summer and the nights (no AC) were grueling. I tried to make the best of things but I was really almost broken. I had given New York everything and gotten very little in return. Something had to give, soon.

I met Lorna in Washington Square Park. We were sitting somewhere watching a theater troupe do exercises and we struck up a conversation about Shakespeare. Somehow something stuck between us and we wound up at this swank apartment on Riverside Drive. She was house-sitting so there was no one home. We smoked a lot of dope and listened to good music and ran around goofing off. When I could, I was crashing at 92<sup>nd</sup> and Columbus, because Brooklyn without AC was horrendous. So I did not have far to go when I left Lorna, and we did this for several nights. It reinforced for me the fact that New York is no longer a city you can enjoy without proper funds, though it used to be. These dates with Lorna were, in fact, my "last tango in New York." I felt myself ready to give up and, when August hit, I threw in the towel. I would go back to Philly and see what I could make of it. I had never lived in Philly proper before, so there was still a certain amount of mystery for me to look forward to. My parents agreed to let me crash in Glenside until I could find a job and a place to stay. I spent a few days hanging around South Street and Philly seemed *managable*, like heaven on earth compared to NYC. I often chose to drink coffee at Philly Java at 4<sup>th</sup> and Lombard, as I had a history with the place. During those horrible months in early '97 when I was stuck at home, I became involved with a group of poets who ran their own journal and did readings out of Philly Java. The most memorable of this group was Vlad, a Russian trust-funder with a baby-face and a bald pate who liked to write about low-lives. His signature poem involved "a dirty whore, takin' a bath, smoking crack, singing songs from time to time."

On one memorable evening, I had parked the Jetta at the Glenside Station and Vlad gave me a ride back to my own car. He played me Eno's *Another Green World* and it became an instant favorite. The group adopted me to a certain extent and published a handful of my things. I couldn't enjoy it because I was so beat-to-shit at the time but I felt comfortable at Java and knew I could find "action" there. The first thing that happened at Java, and my first taste of Philly "attitude," was a fight I had with the barrista about indie rock. I can't remember how or why it happened but it was violent and not a little bit sexy. Maybe the second day there, I saw a guy roughly

my age (and who resembled *White Album*-era Paul McCartney) scribbling poetry. I went up and introduced myself. His name was Jeremy. Turns out we had met before, also in '97. I was on an adventure in Manayunk with Chris, and we wound up in someone's apartment. Jeremy was there playing a guitar and we jammed on Smiths songs and on "Astral Weeks" by Van Morrison. Now we had a quick talk and Jeremy signed on instantly to be my poetry mentor (he had a degree from Villanova and I was still degree-less), and I noticed that his personality was histrionic, rather "kitchen sink" and that he was full of eccentricities and odd humor. I had been hired at a place called Rittenhouse Market at 18<sup>th</sup> and Spruce as a cashier, and it was surprisingly non-stressful (if slow), and at first I did not feel humiliated by it. The strangest thing that happened there was when a girl I remembered vaguely from Penn State showed up and told me she enjoyed the Outlaws play I had written that had been done that spring. To my knowledge there had been no Outlaws play done that spring, but it turns out they had produced "Mortuary Puppies" without either telling or asking me. What class! She described it as "the one where they ran all your poems together." There was also a bloke working at the market named Lymond, absolutely emaciated, with a pony-tail and mustache. We hit it off, and it turns out Lymond was a key player in the Philly Goth scene that was developing at this time. It was the beginning of a Goth connection that I was to develop in the months to come. First, I had to find a place to live. This time, I had family help— Larry had a friend who was a landlord, and who offered me a place at 21<sup>st</sup> and Race for a discount rate. I accepted immediately, it was a great pad and would have been unthinkable in New York. I moved in as autumn broke gently.

XIX.

People started arriving  
unceremoniously in my life,  
just as I had hoped they would.  
Deb was a few years older than me,  
straight black hair, big brown eyes, I was  
sitting at Java and she just walked up to me  
and started yakking. Turns out she lived in a  
swank apartment right around the corner from  
Java. I quickly became a play-thing for her, though  
we never consummated our relationship. It didn't take  
me long to realize that Deb had some kind of personality  
disorder. She was always throwing money and credit cards  
around, though she did not have a job. Turns out she was a  
Daddy's little girl and was wont to hit her father up for funds.  
I would sit with her while she planned her next Caribbean vacation  
and talked about opening her own nail salon. She was always up for  
a cheap hustle; when we went to see *The Sixth Sense*, she snuck in while  
I paid. She was terrifying, and the movie was too. But for a few weeks, we  
were inseparable; we drove around in her car, a white Honda, and did random  
stuff. She even liked my music. We walked at Valley Green and cuddled a little bit  
on one of the benches, but Deb liked muscle-men and an "art-waif" wasn't her idea  
of a lover. She did turn me on to *The Sea and Cake*, though. And invited herself to do  
her laundry in my apartment, with a washer that worked and a dryer that was half-functional  
at best. It was a bit like Gina in New York— I really didn't understand what we were  
supposed to be doing together. Eventually the whole thing died down and I rarely  
saw Deb again. Someone more memorable was Joni, another Java pick-up. Joni  
was seventeen, and had her black hair cut in Bettie Page bangs. She was a little  
plump, but pleasingly so. She was dressed in all the accoutrements of "Goth"—  
black skirts, fish-nets, jewelry. I sat down next to her and she buzzed me  
instantly. There was a current of mutual desire there. Before the night  
was over, I was making out with her while she waited for her bus  
back to Chestnut Hill, thinking of Renton and Diane in *Trainspotting*.  
We made a date for the following Saturday. It was a sunny day in  
October, and I met Joni in Rittenhouse Square. We made the  
fifteen minute walk back to my apartment at 21<sup>st</sup> and Race.  
I managed to cook her a serviceable dinner, though I did  
not yet know the trick of dripping and mixing olive oil  
into cooked pasta, so the pasta was dry. We drank  
white wine with the meal and sat at the wicker  
table with windows overlooking the Franklin  
Institute. Once that was done Joni was very  
quick in initiating the "next phase." She  
had a particular penchant for fellatio  
and bragged about the number of  
men she'd given head to before.  
I was slightly taken aback by  
her "landing strip," and had

yet to learn that women  
generally have learned  
to use their pubes as  
a mode of self-  
expression.

Joni and

I had

several

dates like

this, and it

seemed serious

enough to her that

she thought I should

meet her parents. We took

the train together out to Chestnut

Hill. Joni's mom was clearly traumatized

by her daughter's activities, while her step-dad

was also solicitous. Joni lied and told them I was

20, rather than 23, and studying at Temple. They

served plantains as dessert and seemed like reasonable,

cultured people, but some things I said about New York

gave me away and they knew I wasn't 20. They asked me to

sing for them and I did a little Bowie. Still, this meeting can't

have gone that well because I didn't see Joni for ages afterwards.

I didn't register it as a loss because Joni and I were only beginning

to know each other, and I had so much other stuff on my plate at the

time. I started to go to Goth parties with Lymond. A cast of characters

was introduced to me that would stay in my life for quite some time. Dave

and Nemon were older than me, two African-American musicians (and excellent

ones) who were also mystical Christians and Goth stalwarts. I could talk to them

about ghosts, astrology, all that stuff without feeling self-conscious. Dave and I

would jam in the Java back-room, and the songs he was producing at the time were

stunning, like an amalgamation of Syd Barrett, Prince, and thrash metal. He used all

kinds of augmented and diminished chords and his chord changes were outrageous.

Dave and Nemon (who was more into playing keyboards and more laid-back about his

music than Dave was) were ubiquitous on the Goth scene and Dave often played these

parties with his band, Xextacy (pronounced "Ecstasy"), which consisted of him, a bass

player, and a guy playing bongos. The first Goth party I went to, at 45<sup>th</sup> and Spruce, I sat in

the front of a crowd in somebody's bedroom, high as a kite, and listened to Dave play his

songs. They were hands-down better than any I had heard by the Sidewalk people in New

York, and Briana, and I started to get high hopes that maybe something was happening in

Philly. I was young enough and naïve enough not to realize that there are talented people

everywhere, and that who makes it and who doesn't (in rock, at least), often simply

comes down to luck and timing. Dave was very uptight about his music and had

I been more worldly-wise, I would've known that that was a bad sign, that you

have to be willing to eat shit to an extent to make it. But I sat there, soaking

it all in, and I felt like I had won a million dollars. All I had to do was start

putting pieces together and everything would fall right into place.



XX.

Someone told me about an open mic that was held every week at a place called St. George's, on 7<sup>th</sup> Street off of South. I walked in while a thunder and lightning storm was brewing, and it turned out there was a skylight right above the stage so performers were lit up by the lightning flashes. It worked perfectly for me because almost everyone that played that night knocked me out. Dave and Nemon were there, and great, and a poet named Lora with her friend Matt playing keyboard while she read. I knew Lora from my '97 forays into the Philly reading circuit, and I knew Matt too from a reading at Robin's in '98. Matt had needed a copy of the Doors "The End" and I happened to have one in my pocket: serendipity! It was a memorable reading (though I was still in State College mode) because somebody slipped me a valium (which I had never had before) and I became very happy. So here they were, Lora remembered me and Matt was loquacious and friendly. Matt was short, going bald, with stringy brown hair and glasses, a mad professor type, while Lora had long black hair, a swarthy, rough complexion, and was deaf in one ear. We were definitely a bunch of freaks. So I watched them do their act and then spent a long time talking to Matt at the bar. I gave him the rap that I was giving everyone, that there could be a "Philly scene" to rival any other city's, that if we all teamed up we could make it happen, that everything we needed was right in front of us. Matt was both bemused and interested. He could see how on fire I was about the whole thing. While we were talking, we were approached by a red-headed, bearded, tall guy from Chicago named Dan. In all the years I knew Dan, I could never get a coherent history out of him, but he was a musician and a performer and he definitely wanted in. There was a sense we all had that night that something was in the making, that something was coming together. It turns out that the only real difference between me and these folks is that I really did want to take over the world. All the dudes like Dave and Nemon, brilliant as they were, were happy to swim around in a small pond. But I

was too young and jazzed to notice such discrepancies and I felt ready to lead all of us into the Wild West of cultural pioneering. I walked home that night in the pouring rain and I didn't give a damn. Becoming the leader of a new scene was all I cared about. There were, however, other details to attend to. I was already sick of Rittenhouse Market, so I went out and looked for another gig. I wound up being hired by the Barnes and Noble, also on Rittenhouse Square, and it was, in many respects, fortuitous. You could get full health insurance coverage for working only twenty hours a week, I had always been "bookish," and the atmosphere was relatively laid back.

This would be  
my main  
paying gig  
for many years.

I also decided to keep going back to New York to record with Paul. I was unsatisfied with the recording we had done of "Riding the Waves," and had another crack at it. This time, I took off the elaborate *Hunky Dory* intro, added a riff straight off of *Siamese Dream*, and layered acoustic guitars for an appropriately oceanic effect. Nevertheless, when it was over I got depressed and thought it was rubbish, though it turned out to be one of the best recordings I ever made. I had vague plans to collect the recordings I had done with Paul and release them under the title *Galtanize*. I enquired at several indie labels in Philly. no dice. I also made plans to bring Dave and Xextacy up to record at Buttons. It seemed like the logical next step. Paul agreed that when I started playing out in Philly, he would come down and play bass for me. His generosity never ceased to knock me out, considering who his family was and how obnoxious he could've been. To move things forward, I would need to find a venue where we could all play. I decided to start small and made an inquiry at a coffee shop at 13<sup>th</sup> and Pine called the Last Drop. I also decided we needed a collective name. I came up with "This Charming Lab," partly because Jeremy was into the Smiths, partly because Bowie in his early twenties also ran an "Arts Lab" in his native London 'burb. I would include poetry, fiction, film, dance, everything: this would be about "Art," rather than merely rock and roll. The Java readings with Jeremy continued, and it seemed to me that all these worlds needed to coalesce, and I was the man to make it happen, especially as

I was now relatively solvent and enjoying my life again. So, the Last Drop it was, 11/26.

XXI.

When the date arrived, I was still with Joni. She was attired in her usual all-black mode. We got to the Drop before anyone else did, and sat downstairs (where the show was to be), on the steps that led up to the back window, making out. Jeremy arrived and I introduced Joni to him. However, we had a big problem when Xextacy showed up with their amplifiers. For some reason, the owner had thought that the music would be acoustic. He threw a fit when he saw the amps, and put a note on the door of the Drop saying "there will be no music tonight." I was already wound up pretty tight and this caused me to snap. An argument ensued that I would have lost had it not been for Lou, Dave's bongo player. He told me to shut up and walked reasonably and sensibly up to the owner and negotiated with him. In ten minutes, the sign was taken down and we were in business again. It was good that the sign was taken down because dozens of Goth kids came pouring in. This was when Dave had a big draw and people followed him around everywhere. There was excitement in the air and suddenly Matt and Lora were on the scene too. I found out what they called themselves: Radio Eris. Downstairs at the Drop was dimly lit, with checkered linoleum floors, and we began in an atmosphere of moody semi-gloom. Dave was playing his customized red twelve-string, which I also enjoyed playing (when he would let me), and all his great early songs came tumbling out: there was "Parade," "Elaborate Dreams," "God's Pinata" and they all had catchy choruses that many of us sang along to. Matt and Lora were also good, they had a song poem that started off, "Philadelphia, I am leaving you," and also a "Coffee Song," and there was a purity to their stance that got muddied up when Radio Eris became a full-fledged band. I got a little panicky because people were openly smoking bowls

but there was little I could do about it. As fraught as this first show was, it wound up being one of the most exciting This Charming Lab shows. I wanted to bring Dave to New York to record a demo with Paul at Buttons Sound. I arranged the thing and Dave said he could get a ride up with Lou. I wound up spending the weekend in New York and Xextacy came up Friday night. Me and Paul waited endlessly— Xextacy wound up being four hours late. This was right around the time Beck put out *Midnite Vultures*. I decided to write a quick homage to him and record it on the fly. It turned out good, I called it “Gettin’ Real Numb to be Number One,” but I never heard it again and it is (I assume) lost in the Buttons Sound vaults to this day. Dave did eventually make it to Buttons, along with Lou. Dave was very uptight about recording in a professional studio, and we had to coach him through the process. I do not believe that he had ever seriously recorded before this. I had him lay down rhythm tracks of twelve-string guitar and bongos and then overdub his vocals. He discovered that when you aren’t encumbered by an instrument, you have that much more freedom to do an emotive, expressive vocal. Yet if you are used to singing while you play, this can feel awkward at first. After several fair takes, Dave hit his stride. He knocked everyone out, including Paul. I was extremely proud, and I had faith that this guy could be unstoppable. So Paul and I wrapped things up, once Xextacy left (and after giving them the DAT tape) in a jubilant mood. The next week, I wanted to talk to Dave about how he felt the recording went, and he was (to my surprise) evasive. I soon discovered why— turns out that somehow, between New York and Philly, Dave and his buddies had lost the DAT tape. I was shocked and hurt— this was a professionally recorded demo from a New York studio, and they had lost the DAT tape in one night? Dave didn’t seem to give a shit. I just couldn’t believe it. Didn’t Dave want to succeed? Didn’t he want the world to know about all of his great songs? The answer, I see clearly now, is no. Success was a matter of no great concern to Dave. I was projecting my own ambitions onto him, assuming he felt like I did, and he did not. Nevertheless, I had arranged to give him something for free that would otherwise have cost hundreds of dollars, and he had thrown it away. I knew then that despite Dave’s talent,

he was an unsafe bet. I would need to expand outward to keep This Charming Lab afloat, and good.

XXII.

At that time, the Khyber was the hottest rock club in Philly. It was rather dingy— a long, narrow bar in a narrow room with a jukebox, attached by two open entrances to the main space, which had a low stage, low ceiling, no chairs, and a large row of windows behind the stage. One night, I'm not sure why, but I wound up there with Dave and Nemon. It was, incidentally, the first night that I decided to dress completely Goth— black fishnet shirt, lipstick, studded dog collar, leather pants, the whole nine yards. Dave and his gang went nuts when they saw me. They were amused, and I am guessing it was because I still looked like a nice Jewish boy from the suburbs. In any case, we went in to watch the show. The band that was playing were called Metro, and I had heard about them. They were all Goth-affiliated without being Goth. The lead singer was kind of Jagger-ish, with the preening, rooster-like quality that makes for a good front man. I'll call him G. Rich, the guitar player, also looked nice and suburban. The music they played was an amalgamation of 80s synth-pop and 90s alternative rock, with a bit of 70s punk thrown in. A few of them had Flock of Seagulls haircuts, too. Metro were big in Philly at the time, equally loved and hated. They had a large female following, mostly because of G, but the macho indie dudes hated them. Someone wrote on their posters, "Is this the Fixx?" As for me, I thought they were tremendous, a lot of fun, and I had a feeling I would click with them personally too. After the show was over, Metro came over to the bar, where we were all sitting. I introduced myself to G and gave him the This Charming Lab sales pitch. He was immediately interested and we got on famously. Rich and I hit it off, too. I noticed antagonism between Dave and G— two Scorpio prima donnas, what can you do? Plus, I'm sure Dave could sense that my allegiance was shifting away from him and towards Metro. However, many things were still hanging in the balance and I played a few more café shows with Dave and Xextacy. I'll never forget the first time I took out my guitar in Philly and played— I had a huge internal sense that, where my music was concerned, I was *in the wrong place at the wrong time*. Where the music business is concerned, it is very simple— you are either in the right place at the right time or you aren't. I wasn't, and I knew it intuitively immediately. I knew it, and

tried not to notice. But I had a whole scene going in Philly, so I felt I had no choice but to follow it through. I discovered a place on 3<sup>rd</sup>, between Market and Arch, called the Upside Down Café, and it rapidly became the hangout place for the This Charming Lab crew. The place was never packed, so we could go in there and do more or less whatever we wanted.

A woman named Mimi, a very pretty African-American ex-lawyer in her mid-thirties, was the proprietor, and she was more than accommodating. At the time, I had gotten mixed up with a woman named Tracy, a professional tease who liked to keep men orbiting like satellites around her. She was a bit older and had no intention of getting seriously involved, but she liked my crew and the Upside Down so she was around a lot. On one memorable night, Dan and I got stuck in her apartment for several hours, as she went back and forth about who she wanted to sleep with. Appropriately, and to our dismay, she decided she didn't want either of us and kicked us out at about 2 am. Me and Dan had a big argument that we later laughed about. Tracy was another "suicide blonde," and a new one was about to show up. One great thing about the Upside Down was that it was advantageously placed for First Friday crowds (on the first Friday of every month in Philly, Olde City galleries throw open their doors, offer wine, cheese, new art). On one First Friday, we were jamming when two girls came in, a blonde and a brunette. They started talking to us and we hit it off. I decided, guitar slung over shoulder, to take off with them. We went to the Painted Bride for some monster open reading they were having. The blonde had some guy (a DJ) hanging all over her. Her name was Genevieve, but we called her Gen. I tried to hit on the brunette, and she was flirty but indecisive (I later found out that she was hooking up with Aditya, of all people, at the same time.) I left disappointed, but a few weeks later I ran into Gen at Java (where else?) and wound up taking her home. There was a nice Java kid, who wound up also coming home with us (for no apparent reason), and I felt bad that he had to listen to me and Gen all night. Gen had a poet father, a rough upbringing, and was a child of the streets. She was 19 at the time, and sex meant recreation. Oddly, she didn't look "street"; she was pale blonde,

blue-eyed, with delicate fair skin and a thin frame.  
She also dressed with a certain amount of class— no  
skirts, clothes that could have been “suburban,” no make-up.

XXIII.

Nevertheless, where love was concerned she was legitimately all  
over the place. I was by no means alone in enjoying her generosity. She  
happened to be in art school at the time, and I would meet her at a studio  
she was borrowing in Powelton Village. It was quite funky, with high ceilings  
and long windows, dotted with African art that the usual tenant had affixed to the  
walls. Gen’s stuff was all abstract, and she could have developed into a fine painter, but  
she lacked discipline. Her one indulgence, where clothing was concerned, was a fake leopard  
skin coat that she liked to wear (this was the dead of winter.) It made her look like the uppity  
bitches that hang around North-East Philly, only her prettiness made the whole package  
appear incongruous. She would show up drunk at my apartment, and she knew she  
could count on me to let her in. Though she was several years younger than me,  
she knew more than I did about the ways of the flesh, and she taught me every  
thing she knew— how to sixty-nine, how to do doggy-style, and through  
Gen’s vocalized enthusiasm I learned that I am well-endowed (strange  
to learn, because I had always assumed the opposite.) Gen’s quirks  
were all sexy— she was into boots, and her favorite trick was  
to slip into bed naked but for the boots. She liked to ride  
wearing the boots, and it was my first taste of “kink.”

I was serious enough about Gen to introduce her  
to my family— we went with my Mom to see  
a Sam Shepard play (which my Mom hated,  
thinking his plays to be “the Emperor’s  
New Clothes”), and Gen came out  
to dinner with us and a well-  
known poet when he  
came through town.  
To my family, she  
was “crazy Gen,”  
and they  
regarded her  
with some fondness.  
However, despite her  
delicate beauty, she did  
things that I just couldn’t  
accept. That March, Beck was  
coming to the Tower Theater to  
support *Midnite Vultures*. Gen told me  
that she and her friends had tickets and  
that we should go. I said OK. We hopped  
in the car with her friends and I had a good  
time making out with Gen in the back seat.  
However, we got there, and I found out that not  
only did we not have tickets (which meant that Gen

had lied to me), but that Gen and her friends planned to sneak in by breaking down the door at the side of the Tower Theater. I was extremely uncomfortable with this scenario, and I broke into intense cognitive dissonance. If we were caught, we could end up in jail. So I stood and watched them break down the door. It worked, we snuck in, but the cops had seen and started chasing us. I lost my nerve, ran out, and took a cab home. Gen later complained that I should've stayed, that they had evaded the cops and had a good time, but I suppose it was my suburban roots showing through. Somehow, this incident seemed to seal the deal, and me and Gen were on the outs. Actually, we didn't really break up— Gen just drifted away, in her Piscean manner. Joni put in another brief appearance at this time, looking to get laid, but the attraction was a dead one for me.

Dan had liked Gen too—  
this was when he  
happened to sell  
me some laced  
weed. I spent  
three nights  
not sleeping, staring  
at shadows of branches  
creep up my wall. This Charming  
Lab was on hiatus, so I looked for  
other things to do. I hosted a reading  
in Manayunk, which Jeremy had set up,  
and I rode the train there, stoned, with Matt  
and Dan. I had planned to crack eggs all over my  
body (in the manner of Iggy Pop), but I wimped out  
once at the venue and it was just another reading. I also  
spent a semester doing philosophy at Temple. The ostensible  
plan was for me to do my degree there, but it didn't feel quite right  
and I had a feeling it wouldn't happen. I also discovered post-modernity,  
through an art-book called "It Hurts," by a British art critic. Bruce Nauman  
hit me immediately, and I became a die-hard fan. But, really, I was biding my  
time, looking for a breakthrough. This arrived when I was finally able to  
get This Charming Lab booked at the Khyber. The show was not until  
late April, and it was myself, Metro, and Radio Eris. Were we ready  
to jump into the Philly big-leagues? I felt that with Metro aboard,  
we were. This is when G and I started hanging out hard-core,  
getting high, talking about girls. G had already been married  
(so he said), had already been with dozens of women, so,  
as with Gen, I was receptive to his wisdom. His  
philosophy had a lot to do with self-preservation,



with how to maintain integrity in the face of  
the devouring female. His girls tended to  
be vicious and cat-like. I looked in awe  
at the bizarre dances they did.

XIV.

The first G-girl I met was  
blonde, chunky, with, as  
G said, "a body like a  
porn star." She was  
also shrill, abrupt,  
and easily angered.  
We were all at a  
party at Nemon's,  
very stoned, and  
in the frame  
of mind in  
which it  
is difficult to  
tell where you are  
or how you got there.  
G went off to do some-  
thing and somehow I got  
trapped in a dark room (it looked  
like a den of some sort, but this was  
West Philly and everything was dust and  
wood) with this girl. I made an attempt to  
talk to her, but she sat with her hands in her lap  
and her lips pursed. Whatever wavelength she was  
on, it was one I couldn't access. It seemed to me, when I  
thought about it later, that girls like this were after an  
*image* that G embodied. He was trapped in a world in which  
he was always objectified and where the traditional gender  
roles were reversed. G never chased, but he lived in a social  
context in which certain types of girls "grabbed" him. In any case,  
I knew immediately that there was little room for me in this context.  
Even when I dressed Goth, I'm sure the cleanliness of suburbia was  
visible underneath. I could never really be "street" the way G was. The  
deep dirt that G embodied, and that these girls wanted (it was a kind of  
authenticity, a badge of psycho-sexual honor) wasn't there. Yet I didn't  
register this as a loss— I was fascinated by this world where sex was  
taken as lightly as having a drink, and in which sexuality and a  
sense of self were conflated. Being friends with G allowed  
me a voyeuristic sense of participation, and pushed me  
another notch down in my quest towards ultimate  
downwards mobility. In all the time I knew him,  
there was only one G-girl I really wanted— her

name was Kim, and she was a stunningly beautiful blonde Southern belle. There was something deep and rich about her that wasn't merely trashy. She was like me— more a voyeur than a participant. But she went for G and barely noticed me, and that was the only time it stung. When she was around, I really did feel invisible, like I had no essence or that something had been robbed from me. Rachel was another G-girl, more in the tradition of the feisty Goth bitch. Hair braided and dyed fire-engine red, rail-thin, piercings everywhere, Rachel was hell on wheels, and I was happy not to be noticed by her. Her and G were always having screaming arguments, and if I remember correctly, he always lost. I had to be careful with G, because if I showed any signs of erudition he would become uncomfortable. But I still had no degrees, which paradoxically allowed me to “pass” among street people in a way that I never could now. Also, I was still working a retail job, which lent me some cred in this somewhat topsy-turvy milieu. At Barnes and Noble, I started to notice a girl named Melissa, who began working there a few months after I did. Like Kim, she was Southern, but slender and delicate, rather than buxom, with big, round blue eyes, long, wavy black hair, and pale skin. Physically, she reminded me of Maria. She had a boyfriend, so I couldn't pursue her in earnest, but I felt a connection begin to grow as we talked. She even began coming to see This Charming Lab shows. Interestingly, G and Melissa took an instant dislike to each other. Melissa had high standards and a lot of class (though she came from a modest background) and sensed the grime of “street” all over G. G knew that Melissa would never play the kinds of games he liked to play, that she was normal,

stable, and strong,  
and so he declared  
her (wrongly) to be  
"homely." They  
were two versions  
of poor.

XV.

The first Khyber  
show loomed— there  
were all kinds of hassles  
leading up to it. Dave was  
pissed because I didn't include  
him, but God knows if he would  
even have shown up. I was in the  
middle of writing a rock opera, "The  
Seduction of Sara Starr." It was based  
on a song I had written in NYC (verses,  
Tompkins Square Park, chorus, Washington),  
and that I had recorded at Buttons. These wound  
up being the songs I played out in Philly (there were  
about fourteen of them). This collection could've been  
my *magnum opus*, but wound up largely unrecorded. Paul  
came down from NYC to play with me, and I had recruited  
Pete from the Godheads to play drums (he was living with Ben  
in West Philly at the time). It sucked because Pete was such a great  
drummer, but he had very obscure tastes and an eccentric musical  
personality and playing classic rock was not really what he wanted  
to do. As it happens, I never found another drummer that I  
clicked with as much as with Pete. I had terrible luck that  
way. It also boded ill that I had failed to negotiate business  
details with the Khyber. People were being charged at the  
door but I had no idea where the money was going or  
if we even broke even. It was a week-night, the room  
was half-full, so G-d only knows. Metro arrived with  
their usual bad-assed attitude intact. For this special  
occasion, Nora, a gorgeous redhead that was dating  
Rich, showed up with full video apparatus to tape  
the show. I tried (and failed) to talk to her— just  
as with G's girls, our wavelengths were not  
compatible. Still, Metro brought in the  
better part of our audience, and the  
blokes sneered while the girls ate  
it up. Metro were also quite  
contemptuous of Radio  
Eris. Eris had developed  
into a full band, but, in  
all honesty, worked

much better when  
it was just Matt  
and Lora. As a  
full band, they  
weren't *Metal*  
*Machine*  
*Music*

cacophonous and  
didn't sound good. It  
was like listening to a wall  
of mud, and they cleared the  
room right out. Eris also seemed  
to take for granted that they wouldn't  
be accepted, and adopted a loser's mentality.  
Dave showed up and scowled. All in all, I felt  
that the show was a failure— the parts didn't fit  
together, there was no cohesion. The Khyber also  
weren't happy because there were loose ends that never  
got fit back together. Still (and surprisingly, probably because  
of Metro), I managed to book another Khyber show within a few  
weeks. They might have been cutting me a break because I was young.  
Melissa (providentially) broke up with her boyfriend at around this time,  
and we went on our first date. It all seemed very unambiguous and we tumbled  
straight into bed. By this time, Melissa's thick, wavy hair reached almost all the way  
down her back— she called it her "Captain Caveman" hair. It made her look sort of  
witchy and was a turn-on for me (it made me think of the Millay poem "Witch-Wife,"  
and it is a poem that I still associate with Melissa.) Melissa was "shaved," and the  
expressive function of this (she said) was to demonstrate her cleanliness. I asked  
if she would consider growing herself out, and she said OK. In fact, I was struck  
by how much she wanted me and I knew in my gut that this was another real  
relationship. Another young lady had started working at B & N. Her name  
was Mary, and she was a tall, thin, leggy blonde with straight hair and a  
formal manner. At first, I did not take much notice of her— she seemed  
cold and aloof. She also had a hard time dealing with my bizarre sense  
of humor. Melissa didn't like her, thought she was a "space cadet."  
Melissa, actually, had a misanthropic streak and was very choosy  
about who she spent time with. Melissa wasn't necessarily  
artsy, but she had strong likes and dislikes (Billy Corgan  
being her absolute fave), and as I would play her things  
and show her poems, she was never indifferent or on  
the fence. She gave an immediate yes to Oscar Wilde  
and an immediate no to Cocteau. I loved this about  
her— this is something you could never get from  
a G-girl. For them (it seemed to me), anything  
abstracted away from fucking, drugging, and  
drinking was off the map. They had little  
intelligence and no taste. Melissa and I  
could discuss things intelligently, and

it turns out Melissa got a higher  
score on the SATs than I did!  
So, while This Charming Lab  
went up and down, I was  
able to consolidate a real  
relationship, before Mary  
burst into my life.

XXVI.

It seemed that  
it might be a  
good idea  
to take  
what I had  
and give it a larger  
form— to do a show  
that had the cohesion the  
Khyber show lacked, and  
that really showed This Charming  
Lab in the best light possible. People  
had told me about the Killtime Warehouse  
in West Philly. It was a huge, grimy, ugly space  
that was being used for big punk shows. The woman  
that ran it was a junkie with glazed eyes but she was easy  
to work with and I paid a few hundred dollars to rent out the  
space for July 9. Besides Metro and Eris, I recruited a few outside  
bands that were popular in Philly at the time. I thought perhaps we  
could get a little press, but it didn't happen. I also, very foolishly, let the  
business details slip through the cracks. The communal feeling was there  
with Metro and Eris— they didn't care. They were in it, as I was, for "love."  
But the other bands assumed that they would be paid. I told no lies, but these  
things were being assumed behind my back. In any case, I was ill-prepared for the  
show, and didn't help myself by allowing one of the cute girls from the headlining  
band to get me thoroughly stoned at the onset of the night. The evening started off  
so slowly, in fact, that I assumed no one was going to show up. Why stand at the door  
collecting money when no one was coming in? Antics were going on that were fun to  
watch— Metro got in a fight with one of the other bands (G was not only performing  
but behind the board, he was a competent sound-guy). Eris cleared out another room of  
whatever people happened to be there. Thus, it was a huge jolt when, around midnight, tons  
of people suddenly flooded in. I was stoned and paranoid and in no shape to ask anyone  
for money. I asked Eris to help but they wouldn't do it. Metro also couldn't be bothered.  
Truly, it was my responsibility and I felt like shit for dropping the ball. On the other  
hand, the conceit (and it did prove to be a conceit) of This Charming Lab was that  
we were a group, that we functioned together. It turned out I was really on my  
own— my vision was a bust. So the headliners went on, everyone was into  
it, we wound up getting a decent crowd, but it all went down the tubes  
when they asked for their money and there was none. I was simply

wearing too many different hats at once— I was performing, writing all my own songs, booking shows for me, booking shows for my friends, running an arts Lab, acting as director, coordinator, producer, manager, publicist, and talent scout at the same time. I learned the hard way that you can't do everything at once, and that you have to work with responsible artists or you wind up getting nowhere. The pinch, of course, is that many artists are not responsible, and I was in the position of having fallen into something, rather than having deliberated and chosen wisely. I made lousy choices that set up a swift obsolescence for This Charming Lab, and even my memories of this period are not very fond. I deserved better, and I needed assistance and guidance that I did not receive. Tough shit. Melissa, incidentally, was not there that night, I can't remember why. We had started to go through an intense push/pull phase. I had never been so thoroughly *wanted* and it kind of freaked me out. I felt like I was underwater (she was a Cancer) and it resulted in a sense of claustrophobia. We got in a fight one night outside the Grape Street Pub in Manayunk and I left her crying there, which was a cold move but I was shaky and panicky. At one point, we split for a few weeks, and I thought I couldn't take any more of her cardinal water. But she was working in the basement at B & N and one day I saw her and was overwhelmed with desire for her. I all but carried her back to my place and made love to her and that was it, we were solid again. Melissa was supportive of This Charming Lab even though she was smart enough to see it was floundering. I had signed us up to be part of the Fringe Festival, and we were to do five shows in five days. Mind you, the Fringe wasn't paying me, I was paying them, and it was a rip-off deal by which I gave them money so that they would do ads for us and put us in their festival guide book. For one of the shows, I even got

Bri to come down with some of her friends from NYC, and getting Bri to leave New York was no mean feat. So the stage was set yet again and something could've happened for us. The truth was that I was getting tired. I was carrying all these people on my back who didn't deserve to be carried and who weren't giving anything back. My initial impression stuck—this was the wrong place and the wrong time for my music, but I persevered.

XVII.

Around the time of the Fringe is when complete exhaustion began to sink in. What had I been working for? To create a "scene," a positive social nexus for substantial artists to participate in. I felt that I had manifestly failed, and that the nexus I had created was neither positive nor substantial. At that point, I simply did not have the patience to do things the right way. I thought This Charming Lab would be an instant success, and it was not. Rather than a group of contributing equals, I felt that I had been elected (and I was self nominated) *el presidente* of a very motley crew. So the Fringe shows, while not a debacle, were no fun for me. I had arranged for us to do five shows in five days at the Upside Down. That meant that full bands were out. Metro, my biggest draw, could not participate. Eris could only participate in reduced form. It was natural for me to want to bring Bri in, because she worked in a café context. Melissa, bless her heart, signed on to collect tickets at the door. She was a trooper. Thus, I felt a stinging sense of my own treacherousness when Bri showed up. For the first time, I saw Bri and wanted her intensely. Maybe it was because I had been sexualized by frequent intercourse; maybe it was because "the grass is always greener," but whatever the reason I fell for Bri then and there. Melissa was no dummy, she saw what was happening but there was little she could do. Bri and me had a long, intimate conversation, sitting in a club at Front and Chestnut after the Fringe shows (which were over before evening hit.) Bri emphasized to me how picky she was, how she was "on two hands," and I had

never seen her involved in a serious relationship. I am sure I talked to her about my own (improved) situation, but I was still dying for her. Eventually, we made plans for me to come stay with her in New York.

She was living on  
Central Park  
North, and

I had some paid vacation time on the way from B & N. That, to my knowledge, was the first and only time Bri ever played Philly. She never toured, and she stuck to New York with incredible tenacity. The Fringe shows, meanwhile, were inconclusive. There were a few good crowds, and a few “empties.” Paul came down to play bass for one of the shows, which was nice, but in my exhaustion I did not appreciate it. The mood, not only my mood, but the national mood, was changing, growing increasingly apocalyptic. No one in Philly seriously believed that Bush could defeat Gore (after eight prosperous years under a democratic president), yet his numbers kept inching up in the polls. There seemed to be a disturbing number of signs that America was “swinging right” again. Yet, I hit a wall along with other liberals born into my generation— what could we do? What outlets were available to us? We were outnumbered by Baby Boomers who controlled media and political outlets, and there was nothing to unify us as a discrete group. The GOP showed up in Philly for the Republican National Convention, and no one could understand why Philly was chosen for this purpose. I walked by the Convention Center every day they were in town and was confounded by how jubilant they seemed. Was it because Bush knew he could jerk the strings necessary to get himself elected? Was there something conspiratorial going on? I felt as emasculated politically as I did artistically. My frustrated attempts to “break big” were predicated on my belief in an essentially American myth— that you are either famous or you do not exist. I was too young to see through this and too stubborn to be sensible about it. These myths I believed made



me rigid and it was  
inevitable that  
eventually I  
would snap like  
a twig. Yet, after the  
Fringe, I soldiered on. I  
booked J and his band to  
do a show soon after, and another  
Khyber show, as though the only cure  
for overwork was more work. Thus, I ensured  
what might have been a complete collapse, but wasn't.

#### XVIII.

When election night came, I was working the closing shift at B & N. We were all on edge. At a certain point, a call came through, and by serendipity I took the call. It was Alexandra, the editor of a print journal called *American Writing* that operated out of Philly at the time. Alexandra wanted to publish my poem "Icarus In New York" (written on the Columbia campus days before I left NYC in '99), and needed to confirm with me that the poem had not been accepted elsewhere. I told her it had not and that I looked forward to seeing my work in her journal. This was a big moment for me, my first "major" publication, and I seemed to feel a new world opening up. It was also exactly the kind of break I *wasn't* getting in music. It did go to my head slightly. Between Alexandra's phone call and the election results pouring in, I felt a little bit crazed. When we got home, Melissa and I tumbled into bed and turned on my little black and white TV.

It was odd— hour after hour went by and still the election was not being called. All the election machinery was jammed up. Eventually, well past midnight, we gave up. I woke up at about 4 a.m. to see what was going on— still no decisive result. It had come down to Florida (Melissa's home state), and no one knew how things would swing. I had a sinking feeling that, with Jeb Bush running the show, things were not going to swing our way. But the next day began a liminal period in which no one knew what the hell was going on. In the midst of this turmoil, I bussed it up to New York

to visit Bri. I had just  
seen "Almost Famous,"  
and it had made me nostalgic  
for a rock and roll past that I did  
not have. Oh, how I wanted her. Bri  
welcomed me, and I got a key to her  
apartment, where she was living in a tiny  
room, alongside a bratty corporate type named  
Degan, and a few others. My first day there, I  
stopped into St. Marks Books and tripped over  
Ted Berrigan's *Sonnets*. The pixilated mood of them  
struck a chord with me, and I began to compose my  
own sonnets, of the same type, using Bri's name extensively.  
Meanwhile, the election controversy dragged on, although  
at a certain point we all knew that it was going to swing  
in Bush's favor. None of us had any power to influence  
or control the situation. The fate of our country was  
out of our hands, and that was that. I spent a lot  
of time at alt.com, 9<sup>th</sup> and A, writing poetry  
and listening to the Small Faces. In fact,  
I went to the Virgin Megastore and  
bought one of their albums. It was  
a hidden gem of British rock  
and it gave a particular  
flavor to the whole  
trip. As for Bri,  
she was hectic,  
and the usual  
New York  
whirlwind made  
it impossible to get  
any serious alone-time  
with her. I was also too  
shy to be overt with her about  
my new feelings. And I had a real  
relationship going as well. All of which  
added up to no action, which was somewhat  
disappointing but it was good to be in NYC again.  
Gina showed up again out of nowhere, and quizzed  
me about my sex life. She seemed peeved that I was  
getting laid. They dragged me down to the Living Room  
on Stanton St to see one of their mediocre friends play. Being  
a bit of a punk, I told them straight out what I thought of  
the guy, and of all of their friends. Gina especially did  
not appreciate this, but she had no real taste and no  
real feel for music, and I wasn't saying this stuff to  
be a pissant, I was just telling the truth. Anyway  
Bri was excited because she had seen Liv Tyler

at the Arlene Grocery. That particular night  
ended inconclusively, and when I left NYC  
Bri and I agreed that I should come back  
in December. I had not been unfaithful  
to Melissa, but I was ready to do it,  
which is not much better. Melissa,  
as ever, bravely tried to ignore  
what was going on, which  
was better than I deserved  
at that time. I was too  
young to appreciate  
Melissa's goodness.

IXXX.

The best time I  
ever had with  
Melissa was  
in Glenside,  
that fall,  
Thanksgiving.  
She had taken the  
train with me, armed  
with a plethora of desserts  
(Melissa was a superb cook).  
For some reason, both of our  
moods perked up, despite all the  
turbulence we had been going through.  
We enjoyed socializing with my family and,  
when everyone had gone to bed, we snuck into  
the backyard to smoke a little weed. There, deep  
in suburbia, under the stars, we felt protected and  
loved, different than how we felt in Philly. For me, it  
was a moment of complete peace— I felt my poem coming  
out in *AW* was money in the bank, and I had received a few  
more poetry acceptances as well. I could lose This Charming Lab  
and still have a future to look forward to. Melissa felt that she had  
me for real, and at that moment, she did. We went inside giddily and  
had incredibly hot sex— for some reason, this time the pot opened  
us up (it was not unusual for us to smoke) and I emptied myself  
completely into her. It was the closest Melissa and I had ever  
been. This Charming Lab was in abeyance— there was a  
final Khyber show booked, but I knew it would be a  
disaster, and it was. This was the first and only time  
that absolutely no one showed up. The humiliation  
was awful and it reinforced my impression that  
in the context of Philly in 2000, this just wasn't  
worth it. Wrong place, wrong time, go home.  
Besides, I was having unprecedented luck

with poetry, and I was as happy with one  
art-form as with the other. I believe  
that Metro changed their name  
and moved to London at this  
time, banking on having a  
better chance of making  
it there. Eris would  
always soldier on  
gamely but it  
wouldn't  
make any difference.

By the time I made it  
up to New York to see  
Bri a second time, I had serious  
misgivings. We had quarreled in  
November and I knew that Bri had  
a knack for burning bridges when things  
got too hot. I don't remember what I was  
expecting— whether I still wanted to have  
some kind of affair, or whether me and Melissa  
were solid enough so that it wasn't an issue. In any  
case, I noticed the minute I got there that the atmosphere  
in the apartment was charged with negative vibes. It was  
December, it was icy cold and the election had been tossed  
to Bush. One of the nights I was there, I felt like going to bed  
a bit early. However, I was sleeping in the living room and  
Bri and Degan wanted to stay up and watch TV. They  
started to make fun of me, and I felt like I was in  
fifth grade all over again. It was petty and stupid.  
I thought, to hell with this. I stormed out (and  
back to Philly) the next morning, after having  
a bitter argument with Bri. I realized that she  
had "burned through" me like she had  
burned through so many others. However,  
Bri and I had plenty of karmic connection  
left, though I didn't know this at the  
time. In any case, at this point I  
was happy to have Melissa to  
come home to, though I  
probably didn't deserve  
her. As the New Year  
approached, I took  
stock of where I  
was and where  
I wanted to be.  
A big revelation  
was coming,  
something I hadn't

foreseen, and that would  
put my life on a more even  
keel and set me on a steadier  
course. In the meantime, Melissa  
and I went through our routines—  
movies, pot, food, music, sex. Working  
at B & N had not yet become terribly onerous  
and there was a certain excitement in December,  
when the store was thronged and everyone was in  
jaunty spirits. My next task, as I saw it, was to become  
more well-informed about poetry. I started to “go in deep,”  
buy the kind of books a specialist would know, like Pound’s  
*Cantos*. When I discovered Keats, the world changed rapidly.

XXX.

In fact, the whole English Romantic gang jumped into my life  
at once: Keats, Wordsworth, Shelley, Byron, Coleridge, Blake. It  
was like I had never really experienced poetry before: this was a new  
kind of poem, metered and very like music, and of course I was enticed  
because several of these guys were obvious precursors to that modern construct,  
“the rock star.” So, this became my reading material, and I would carry the  
little Dover Thrift editions around and read them in coffee shops. I had  
a compelling urge to find out more— things you couldn’t glean just  
from reading. There was no immediate answer to this quandary.

New Years found me in bed with Melissa. By 1 a.m., she was  
asleep, but my mind was turning over quickly and I felt a  
sharp sense of restlessness. This was the night I was  
visited by two ghosts: Ezra Pound and Jim Morrison.

The one ghost represented my future, the other my  
past. I felt that I was doubly blessed, and that,  
between them, a “hand off” had been enacted.

Concurrent with this, it hit me like a thunder-  
bolt: U of Penn! That’s it! That’s where I  
would finish my degree! That’s where I  
belonged, and where I could move  
forward! I was in bed, fifteen  
blocks away from an Ivy  
League school that  
could change my  
life. I didn’t  
know then  
how I would  
do it, but I knew  
I would do it, and  
that it would be my  
salvation. I later found  
out that not only did Pound  
go to Penn, he grew up in

Wyncote! Even as my mind did  
somersaults, I felt that the stage was  
well and truly set. Sure enough, after a  
few months of negotiating with U of Penn,  
I was in. I didn't exactly leave everyone behind,  
but my relationships with the This Charming Lab  
group were never quite the same again. I no longer  
wanted to be a leader or a figurehead, and I abruptly  
stopped playing out in Philly. Now, everything was about  
poetry and literature all the time, and this turned out to be  
my manifest destiny. Even I didn't realize at the time to what  
extent this would be true. But I was being called by something that  
would take over my life and use me for its own purposes, some  
kind of "geist." As a new life began, I submitted to its will.





















